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## **Why White Men Can't Jump and Black Men Can't Think: An Analysis of the American Sports News Media's Coverage of Basketball and its Players from 1980 to the Present**

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WHY WHITE MEN CAN'T JUMP. . . AND BLACK MEN CAN'T THINK

An analysis of the American sports news media's coverage of  
basketball and its players from 1980 to the present

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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by


Robert Charles Scaro

1993

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert Charles Scaro", written over a horizontal line.

Robert Charles Scaro

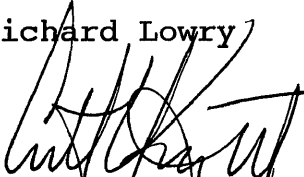
Approved, December 1993

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Hermine Pinson", written over a horizontal line.

Hermine Pinson

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Richard Lowry", written over a horizontal line.

Richard Lowry

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Arthur Knight", written over a horizontal line.

Arthur Knight

To my parents, without whom none of this would have  
been possible.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore and analyze the mainstream American sports news media's coverage of the sport of basketball and its players in the modern era, 1980 to the present. An attempt has been made to define how race has influenced such coverage and to define how basketball, race, economics and the media have interacted over time.

The newspaper, magazine and television coverage of one representative series of games was chosen to be analyzed: the seven that comprised the 1984 National Basketball Association Finals between the Boston Celtics and the Los Angeles Lakers. This coverage is studied as a collective whole to see if the racialized descriptions and interpretations present in newspaper, magazine and television accounts of the series are illustrative, in a larger sense, of a racialized ideology that underlies the presentation and representation of basketball in America.

The paper also looks at the coverage of the 1987 NBA Finals in which the Lakers defeated the Celtics and the 1993 NBA Finals between the Chicago Bulls and the Phoenix Suns, specifically that offered by NBC Sports color commentator Earvin "Magic" Johnson, to see if such coverage parallels that of the 1984 series.

Analysis of the sports news media's coverage of the 1984, 1987 and 1993 NBA Finals suggests that a racialized ideology informs the mainstream American sports news media's coverage of the sport of basketball and its players. Although white and black players demonstrated physical and intellectual similarities in all of these series, such similarities were consistently overlooked or bypassed by both white and black sports news media members in favor of historically derivative racial stereotypes.

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## INTRODUCTION

"Billy! Billy, listen to me! White men can't jump." While clearly a hyperbole, Sidney Deane's warning to Billy Hoyle in the film White Men Can't Jump holds singular importance in late twentieth century America.<sup>1</sup> In a period in which the country has ostensibly moved away from race-based discrimination, Deane's words suggest that skin color is still considered a significant marker of distinction in one major area at least. That area is the representation of sports in the media.

Traditionally, academic work that focuses on the subject of race in sports has tended to be of a sociological or biological nature. Through the examination of topics such as position stacking, hiring practices and team construction, some studies have attempted to determine if sports reinforce racial distinctions or if they promote racial harmony and function, on the microsocial level, as an idealized version of society.<sup>2</sup> Through the examination and physical testing of white and black athletes, other research projects have attempted to determine if there is a biological or physiological difference between the two races that predisposes whites to certain athletic activities and blacks to others.<sup>3</sup> While valid points of academic interest, sociological and biological studies of race in sports do not

address the issue in its complexity. They overlook an aspect that is of prime importance in the communications-dominated world of modern day America, the media's depiction of a given sport. An examination of the representation of sports in newspapers, magazines, television, radio and film is critical because, consciously or not, the mass media influences how people think about the world.<sup>4</sup> Writing of television news coverage of public demonstrations, Raymond Williams suggests ideas that serve to elaborate why it is important to examine the depiction of sports in the news or journalistic media in particular. "What is 'being seen' in what appears to be a natural form is. . . in part or large part what is 'being made to be seen.'"<sup>5</sup> As a result, "the real actions of men are hidden behind a reified form, a reified mode, a modern medium," that, due to the ubiquity of mediated communication in today's world, is often not detected by people.<sup>6</sup>

While some studies have attempted to analyze race in sports from the perspective of communications, to examine the "reified form" of which Williams writes, none have focused in any depth on the concept of a consistent ideological orientation in the coverage and depiction of the sport of basketball in the American sports news media.<sup>7</sup> My work addresses this neglected side of the issue. I will focus not so much on white and black basketball players and their respective actions on the court, but on how such

players and their actions are represented in American sports journalism. I contend that the journalistic media's treatment of the sport of basketball in America is underlain by an ideology that is derivative in logic and beliefs of America's historical conceptions of race. By foregrounding the epistemological structures of this ideology, I will examine its historical and cultural roots and analyze how race is constructed in the media, specifically the sports news media.<sup>8</sup>

My efforts in this regard have been influenced by Michel Foucault's work in The Archaeology of Knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In essence, the "archaeology of knowledge" is a descriptive term for a method of analysis that strives to question, at the level of its existence, the "already-said" (131). In basic terms, the "already-said" can be understood to signify a "discourse" or a body of knowledge or concepts that is organized by detectable laws or principles (56-7). Examples of such bodies of knowledge include medicine, history, or, in the case of my work, the American journalistic media's representation of basketball and sports, in general. According to Foucault, the basic component of a "discourse" is the "statement" (79-87). It represents a function of language and can be anything from a detailed mathematical table to a brief exclamation to a carefully articulated sentence. In a general sense, the analysis of any "discourse" necessarily begins with an analysis of these

primary building blocks. In a specific sense though, the analysis of a "discourse" begins with an analysis of the "statements" that order the very "forms of description and perceptual codes" (147) that a "discourse" uses. In Foucault's terminology, these most basic of building blocks are called "governing statements" (147).

Using Foucault's paradigm as a starting point, I have identified two pairs of "statements" which I believe "govern" the American sports news media's depiction of the sport of basketball. They are, in common terms, as follows: white men cannot jump, black men cannot think; white men have no style, black men have no substance. Using evidence drawn from newspapers, magazines and television, specifically that found in the coverage of the 1984 National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals between the Boston Celtics and the Los Angeles Lakers, I will reveal the existence of these "governing statements" in the American journalistic media's treatment of basketball and analyze how they are generated.

Pitting the two best teams in the league as well as the two best players in the league in white Celtics' star Larry Bird and black Lakers' star Earvin "Magic" Johnson against each other, the 1984 NBA Finals were a certified major media event that attracted the attention of print and broadcast journalists from all over the world. Based on the newspaper coverage afforded the series by the Boston Globe and the Los

Angeles Times, the magazine coverage by Sports Illustrated and the television coverage by Continetel Broadcasting Studio's sports division (CBS Sports), the issue of race was present in the American sports news media's treatment of the series from start to finish. In fact, it is arguable that the American sports news media's coverage of no other basketball game or series of basketball games in the last fifty years matches that of the 1984 NBA Finals for its display of racialized ideology in the form of the "governing statements" that I have established.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the significance of these "governing statements" rests not just in their existence, but in the function that their existence serves. Their presence in the news media's treatment of a sport so quintessentially American as basketball renders such treatment a window to the problematic construction of racial identity in America.<sup>11</sup> To focus on the manifestations of these "governing statements" in the news media's treatment of the 1984 NBA Finals is to see, in some sense, how America at large defines both whiteness and blackness and the nature of the relationship between the two.

## NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION

1. Twentieth Century Fox Home Video, White Men Can't Jump, 1992.
2. See Lapchik, R., with Stuckey, D. (1991). "Professional Sports: The Racial Report Card," in Eitzen, D. (1993). Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, p. 355-71, and Coakley, J. (1990). Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies. St. Louis, MO: Times Mirror/Mosby College Publishing, p. 217-20, for examples of this type of sociological study of race in sports.
3. See Worthy, M. & Markle, A. (1970). "Racial Differences in Reactive Versus Self-Paced Sports Activities," in the Journal of Personal & Social Psychology, Vol. 16, p. 439-43, and Dunn, J. & Lupfer, M. (1974). "A Comparison of Black and White Boys' Performance in Self-Paced and Reactive Sports Activities," in the Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Vol., 4(1), p. 24-35 for examples of this type of biological/phsyiological study of race in sports.
4. While the extent to which the mass media influences people can be debated, the fact that they exert some influence as Coakley, p. 278 notes cannot.
5. Williams, R. (1978). "Means of Communication as Means of Production" in Williams, R. (1980). Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays. London, England: Verso, p. 60-1.

## NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION, CONT.

6. Williams, R., p. 62.

7. For example, Pearman, W. (1978). "Race on the Sports Page" in the Review of Sport and Leisure, Vol. 3(2), p. 54-68, deals with the difference in volume of coverage white and black universities in the same community received; Condor, R. & Anderson, D. (1984). "Longitudinal Analysis of Coverage Accorded Black and White Athletes in Feature Articles of Sports Illustrated, 1960-1980," in the Journal of Sport Behavior, Vol. 7(1), p. 39-43 addresses how often black athletes were featured in Sports Illustrated and of which sport they tended to represent.

8. My understanding of the nature of ideology in general is consistent with that of Belsey, C. (1980). Critical Practice. London, England: Routledge, p. 5, who suggests that ideology is an unconscious or unquestioned way of viewing the world that influences thought, speech and experience on the individual and group level and is unavoidable in one form or another.

9. Foucault, M. (1972). The Archaeology of Knowledge, Sheridan Smith, A. M. (trans.), New York, NY: Pantheon Books. All future references to this text come from this edition and are marked by page numbers in parentheses; my reading of Foucault is consistent with that of Baker, H. (1984) Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago

## NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION, CONT.

Press, p. 17-9.

10. The 1979 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championship Game between Bird's Indiana State team and Johnson's Michigan State team as well as the 1992 NCAA Championship Game between Duke University and the University of Michigan were also games that were highly racialized in the press. Araton, H. & Bondy, F. (1992). The Selling of the Green: The Financial Rise and Moral Decline of the Boston Celtics. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 114 make a related assertion about the degree to which the 1984 NBA Finals were racialized. According to Coakley, p. 294, black people comprised less than three percent of the total number of print and broadcast journalists that covered basketball in America in 1990. As he also notes, this percentage was higher than that recorded in previous years such as 1984, when the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times, Sports Illustrated and CBS Sports did not have any black reporters covering the NBA Finals. Since these were the media outlets upon which I focused my attention, the sports journalists whose work I examine are all white.

11. My characterization of basketball as a quintessential American sport is based on many factors, including the fact that the game was created in the United States, is dominated by American players and can be and is played by people of all ethnic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds.



## CHAPTER I

### BASKETBALL, THE MEDIA AND RACE: AN OVERVIEW

Played for money before paying audiences that number in the tens of thousands and watched, listened to and read about by millions more across the country, major American sports such as basketball, baseball and football clearly represent significant forms of mass commercial entertainment. As such, each of these sports maintains a close relationship with the media, a relationship that is based on economics and is often reciprocal or even symbiotic in nature.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, the media helps sports teams, leagues and players to make money. In turn, sports teams, leagues and players help the media to make money.

The key to the financial union of sports and the media is advertising. While appealing to people of both sexes, all ages and all socioeconomic levels, sports play very well with men, ages 18-54, that are of average or above average income. Difficult to reach, but potentially very rewarding, this demographic is attractive to advertisers of products such as athletic wear and gear, soft drinks, beer, financial services, automobiles, airlines and insurance. As a result, such advertisers are very interested in advertising their products during sports broadcasts or in the pages of a sports magazine or the sports section of a newspaper. They also are often very willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money to do so. The revenue generated by such advertising

is, in turn, often critical to the financial success of a network, television station, radio station, newspaper or magazine.<sup>2</sup>

The media-sports relationship is also driven by the fact that sports provide media outlets with ample amounts of print and broadcast material. Putting aside cable stations such as ESPN and Sports Channel America which are totally dependent on sports for their programming, many stations depend on sports for large portions of their programming fare. For example, sporting events coverage represents the most popular weekend television programming available and it dominates the Saturday and Sunday afternoon offerings of the major networks and their affiliates. By the same token, the sports section is the most widely read part of the daily and Sunday newspaper. In fact, in many major American newspapers more coverage is given to sports than to any other single topic of interest and it has been estimated that without sports coverage, newspaper sales would drop by thirty percent.<sup>3</sup>

In Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies, Jay Coakely further addresses the financial dynamics of the relationship between sports and the media. As he notes, media coverage helps to heighten public interest in a sport, team or league. Heightened public interest, in turn, works to the financial benefit of a sport in a variety of ways. For example, on the individual team level, it helps to

produce increased ticket sales. Through increased ticket sales team owners reap increased revenue both at the gate and at the concession and souvenir stands.<sup>4</sup> However, today, the profit derived from on-site sales, be it tickets, popcorn or tee-shirts, is not the primary financial benefit incurred by leagues and teams through heightened public interest in a sport. Broadcast rights contracts with television and, to a lesser extent, radio, provide leagues and teams with their most significant source of income.<sup>5</sup> As the wildly escalating salaries in the sport of baseball in the 1980s indicate, this "tv money" helps produce dramatically increased profits for players as well.<sup>6</sup>

The high stakes wedding of sports and the media also has had other significant effects. As Coakley notes, the sports-media union has yielded a desire among sports and media executives alike to make sports into a "more marketable entertainment for all spectators and a more attractive commercial package for sponsors and advertisers."<sup>7</sup> Of course, it is arguable that this desire holds more sway among executives in the broadcast media than it does among their counterparts in the print media. However, it is naive to think that the print media functions primarily as a public servant involved in an altruistic quest for truth, that it has no interest in seeing a sport such as basketball become an even hotter commodity than it already is. Rather, as its substantial coverage of sports

indicates, the print media is also very interested in increasing readership and attracting advertisers or in making money. Consequently, as Alan and John Clarke suggest in "Highlights and Action Replays," the representation of sports in the media is directly influenced by media assumptions about what sells.<sup>8</sup>

From the general perspective of the print and broadcast news media, what sells or engages media consumers most is difference, conflict and simplicity. In other words, the news media works from two premises. The first is that the general public prefers basic accounts that render subjects and issues figuratively black or white over detailed accounts that point out nuances or shades of grey in those same subjects and issues. The second is that the general public is more interested in the differences and conflicts between people, places and things than in the similarities and positive relationships between people, places and things.<sup>9</sup> In general, sports are well-suited to coverage based upon such premises. This is because sporting events usually provide clear winners and losers as well as clear heroes and villains. In addition, allegiances to teams and players often are strong and, as a result, differences between opposing teams and players appear profound and can be easily highlighted by the media.<sup>10</sup>

Skin color, is, of course, a simple and obvious marker of difference. As such, it lends itself well to employment

by all forms and figures of the media that are interested in reaching and engaging a mass audience, including print and broadcast sports journalists. In effect, through their consistent, divergent depictions of white and black athletes in their broadcast coverage and written accounts of games, sports journalists position race as a rudimentary frame or indicator through which viewers, readers and listeners can quickly and easily glean meaning. A brief look at the early history of the NBA serves to illustrate this point by making the terms of the news media's portrayal of white and black athletes clear.

In 1951, Chuck Cooper, Earl Lloyd and Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton crossed the color line and entered the NBA in its second season of existence. With them they brought a style of play that was in many ways the antithesis of that commonly employed at the time, a style that emphasized speed and jumping ability, not to mention spontaneity and creativity.<sup>11</sup> However, it was not until white Boston Celtics' legend Bob Cousy began dribbling behind his back, making no-look and behind-the-back passes and reacting to what the defense gave him rather than rigidly running set plays that this new style of play started to become accepted practice in professional basketball.<sup>12</sup> Previously, in integrated leagues such as the National Basketball League (NBL) and the Basketball Association of America (BAA), such plays had been derided as unnecessary showboating and their

black practitioners as less than serious ballplayers. In fact, in an effort to minimize the proliferation of this style of play and maintain white dominance on the court, black players in those leagues had often been assigned only a minimal role in their team's offensive plays, a practice that continued in the early NBA.<sup>13</sup>

However, with the success of Cousy and the entrance of Bill Russell into the league in 1957 and Wilt Chamberlain a few years later, this tendency to make black players conform to a standard style of play soon faded. Increasingly, NBA coaches designed plays to take full advantage of the abilities of their black players. Consequently, although white players would continue to excel in the NBA for years to come, their days of unquestioned basketball supremacy were over.<sup>14</sup> In one sense though, the days of unquestioned black basketball supremacy never really began. Desirous of explaining or rationalizing the receding position of white players in the NBA to a white dominated world, American sports journalists qualified black success on the court. They depicted it not as the product of black basketball skills, but rather as the product of black physical ability and white mental guidance. The press suggested that all black players had to offer was the natural ability to run and jump. While such ability was nice to look at, it would amount to nothing of consequence unless disciplined and channeled by white coaches and white teammates. Implicitly

then, the news media's representation of the sport of basketball became governed by the statements black men can jump, but not think and black men have style, but no substance or no work ethic, discipline and desire.

Given the traditional American interest in comparing and contrasting white and black people, the beliefs about black players that were advanced by the media to explain their success on the court carried with them related ideas about white players and their success on the court. American sports journalists began to characterize white basketball success primarily as the result of discipline, desire, hard work and intelligence.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, the press suggested that while white players might not look pretty when they played, they knew what it took to win ballgames and, as a result, they often did. Implicitly then, the news media's representation of the sport of basketball also became governed by the statements white men can think, but not jump and white men have substance, but no style.

Of course, in their simplistic focus on differences and conflicts between the two races these notions about white and black players ideally suited the media's standard conception of what the American public wanted to see, hear about and read. However, such notions about white and black players were not created by the sports news media of the 1950s. In fact, they can be traced back to the first half

of the twentieth century. For example, as early as 1912, the on-court success of white Hudson Guild Settlement House star Pete Barry was attributed to his superior mental abilities, while in 1915 the on-court success of black Rutgers University star Paul Robeson was attributed to his superior athletic abilities.<sup>16</sup> By the same token, in the 1920s and 1930s black athleticism and white intelligence were often perceived to be influential forces in the victories of the all-black Harlem Rens and the all-white Original Celtics of New York, respectively. In Five Minutes to Midnight: Race and Sport in the 1990s, Richard Lapchick notes that in the newspapers of the day the Celtics were seen as "smart, steady accurate and graceful poets" on the court, while, in contrast, the Rens were seen as "shifty, strong and fast grinners."<sup>17</sup> Of course, when the two racially opposed teams competed against each other the media not only stressed the notion of difference but also that of conflict. As Lapchick points out, the Celtics-Rens matchups were cast in the press as bitter personal duels, not just heated competition between the two best teams of the day. In these encounters play was often very physical and prior to the game the media inevitably predicted the outbreak of numerous fights.<sup>18</sup>

However, when these concepts about the inherent differences and conflicts between white and black basketball players are viewed in a more general way as derivative



concepts about the inherent differences and conflicts between white and black people, their roots can be traced in an even broader and more far reaching way. They can be followed out of the realm of sports and into that of American society. More specifically, they can be followed into the daily life of the eighteenth century, the first days of slavery.

Compared to the American sports news media's treatment of white and black basketball players, the distinctions drawn between white and black people in the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century were more profound. According to Winthrop Jordan in White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812, there was some debate at this time as to whether or not blacks were even human beings. Based on the hierarchical principles of a then popular theory of creation known as the "Great Chain of Being," blacks were believed to represent the link between apes and humans. This belief was primarily founded upon the fact that blacks came from Africa, a place that had many species of apes and, like apes, had dark skin as well as lips, noses and buttocks that were generally more prominent than those of white people.<sup>19</sup> Though scientifically and intellectually underdeveloped, this argument for blacks as highly evolved apes was comprehensible to scientists and non-scientists alike in that it was based on easily observable evidence. As a result, it was not without its

adherents for awhile.<sup>20</sup>

While the belief that the black race was subhuman ultimately did not endure much past the start of the eighteenth century, as George Fredrickson points out in The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 the belief that the black race was inherently different and, indeed, inferior to the white race did. With scientists such as Dr. Josiah C. Nott leading the way, studies were conducted and essays written in which this alleged inferiority was explored. The bulk of such work suggested that black people suffered from irrevocable intellectual shortcomings that suited them to slavery and domination by the white race. This pseudo-scientific pro-slavery argument stated that the black race needed the white race to guide it and look out for it because it was incapable of doing such things itself. Although these ideas held more sway in the South than they did in the North they were relatively commonplace among white people in America in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Partly as a result of these notions about the limited mental capacities of black people, as well as lingering doubts about their humanity, white people often focused on the physicality of the black race. Slavery's classification of blacks as chattel, like horses, pigs and other livestock only added to this tendency, making it common and easy for white people to think of black people purely as the sum of

their perceived physical abilities.<sup>22</sup> Given this white interest in black bodies and what they could do, a myth of physicality and sexuality developed around the black race. Black people, in general, and black men, in particular, were assumed to be amazing physical specimens. Capable of arduous physical labor, black men were also thought to be promiscuous by nature and better endowed and more potent sexually than white men. They also were believed to have great desire for white women. These beliefs, in turn, led white men to develop a fear that black men would seize white women and defile them through rape. However, on an implicit level, these beliefs also led white men to develop a fear that white women would find black men more sexually satisfying than white men. While this notion of black male desire for white women was, in some measure, a projection by the white man of his own sexual urges for women of the opposite race onto the black man, it nonetheless effectively rendered the black man a threat to white manhood. As such, the relationship between the two assumed an adversarial form, in which white men often physically tortured black men for real or imagined advances toward white women.<sup>23</sup>

As Joel Williamson notes in A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation, the belief that the nature of the white-black relationship was adversarial, as well as the belief that the white race was superior to the black race, continued to circulate in

American society long after the Civil War had ended slavery. In fact, in the early to mid twentieth century, such beliefs were codified by the Jim Crow laws of segregation which prevented blacks from, among many other things, attending the same schools as whites, eating in the same restaurants as whites and drinking out of the same water fountains as whites.<sup>24</sup> Though such laws were overturned with the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s, the basic ideas behind them and overtly racist behavior such as the beating and murder of black men, were never totally eradicated. In essence, that was because such ideas, along with the image of the black man as mentally underdeveloped, but physically potent and the image of the white man as mentally potent, but physically underdeveloped, had long since been sublimated into areas of American life that were less obvious and less controversial than politics and legislation, areas like the American news media's coverage of sports, in general, and basketball, in particular.<sup>25</sup> In these alternate areas, the basic notions of conflict and difference inherent in such ideas were not rejected as dangerously narrow and oversimplified, but rather embraced as useful aids in the presentation and representation of mass commercial entertainment to the general public.<sup>26</sup>

Logic dictates that, as the best players of their respective races, top white players and top black players would be depicted by the media as the most complete

embodiments of traditional notions of whiteness and blackness, respectively. It further stands to reason that the manifestations of historical concepts of race and race relations in American sports journalism's treatment of basketball would be most prevalent in the coverage of games in which top white players were matched against top black players. Given those beliefs, there is no better game or series of games to consider than the 1984 NBA Finals which pitted arguably the best white player in history, Larry Bird, against arguably the best black player in history, Earvin "Magic" Johnson.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1. While sports and the media could obviously exist without each other, they could not exist in their present, lucrative form without each other. Many agree with this notion of a reciprocal relationship between the media and sports, including, for example, Claeys, U. and Van Pelt, H. (1986). "Sport and Mass Media," International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Vol. 21, Nos. 2, 3, p. 95-102.
2. Coakely, J. (1990). Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies. St. Louis, MO: Times Mirror/Mosby College Publishing, p. 282-83.
3. Greendorfer, S. (1983). "Sport and the mass media: general overview," ARENA Review, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 31-48.
4. Coakely, p. 279.
5. Parente, D. (1977). "The interdependence of sport and television," Journal of Communication, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 128-132.
6. Johnson, W. "For Sale: The National Pastime," Sports Illustrated, 17 May 1993, p. 32-9, notes that over the course of baseball's last television contract (4 years for \$1.06 billion with CBS) the average player salary will have increased from \$597,537 per year to \$1.2 million per year. The exposure that players receive from having all of their games broadcast on television can also help to make them celebrities in their own right. As the career of basketball superstar and Nike pitchman Michael Jordan suggests, this

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER I, CONT.

celebrity can, in turn, be parlayed into substantial product endorsement contracts by the individual athlete. According to Baker, J. "The Future of the Sport," Boston Herald 6 June 1993, p. B1, B18, in addition to Nike, Michael Jordan has endorsement deals with McDonald's, Gatorade, Upper Deck Trading Cards and Hanes Underwear and earns over \$20 million per year on his endorsements alone.

7. Coakley, p. 280.

8. Clarke, A. and Clarke, J. (1982). "Highlights and Action Replays--Ideology, Sport and the Media," in Hargreaves, J. (ed.) (1982). Sport, Culture, and Ideology. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 69. See Klatell, D. and Marcus, N. (1988). Sports for Sale: Television, Money, and the Fans. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 210-224, for an analysis that suggests that print journalism represents the last bastion of true reporting, a holdout against the greed that permeates broadcast journalism.

9. These ideas about what types of stories and reports are most interesting to the largest number of people are common to any journalism textbook. See, for example, Mencher, M. (1987). News Reporting and Writing. Dubuque, IO: William C. Brown Publishers, p. 51-53, 62-67.

10. See Wenner, L. (1989). Media, Sports and Society. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, p. 157-179 for a similar assertion about the mediagenic qualities of sports.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER I, CONT.

11. Clifton had previously played for the Harlem Globetrotters, a black barnstorming team, while Cooper had played for Duquense University and Lloyd for West Virginia State. Fox, L. (1974). The Illustrated History of Basketball. New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, p. 53, 162 examines the style of play favored in white leagues.
12. As George, N. (1992). Elevating the Game. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 102 notes, Cousy was well-aware of the double-standard of treatment involving white and black players.
13. As George p. 95-102 notes, on offense Lloyd and Cooper were instructed to move the ball around and shoot only when wide open. Primarily, it was their job to rebound and defend, not score.
14. Fox suggests as much on p. 162.
15. George discusses this notion of the need for black physical abilities to be directed by white people and the media's different depictions of white and black players on p. 109, 141-143.
16. See Lapchick, R. (1991). Five Minutes to Midnight: Race and Sport in the 1990s. Lanham, MD: Madison Books, p. 150 on Barry and George, p. 15 on Robeson.
17. Lapchick, p. 176-177 cites examples from the Dayton (Ohio) Herald and the St. Louis Star Times in the early and mid 1930s.



## NOTES FOR CHAPTER I, CONT.

18. Lapchick, p. 177-178.
19. Jordan, W. (1968). White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, p. 228.
20. Jordan, p. 229-231.
21. Fredrickson, G. (1971). The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914. New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, p. 71-96.
22. Jordan, p. 158-159 alludes to this.
23. Jordan, p. 151-64 discusses white beliefs about the sexuality of black men and their desire for white women, as well as some of the punishments, such as castration and hanging, that were inflicted by white men upon black men for their real or imagined advances toward white women beginning in the mid eighteenth century; Fredrickson, p. 276-82 deals with the same themes as Jordan but focuses on later manifestations of them in the mid to latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in literature such as Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel The Clansman.
24. Williamson, J. (1986). A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 272-76.
25. Williamson's suggests as much on p. 274-5.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER I, CONT.

26. The stereotypical images of white and black people that I have noted in relation to the sports news media's depiction of basketball have by no means been restricted to just the sports news media's depiction of basketball. Rather they have been perpetuated to one extent or another in numerous sports related films, television shows and advertisements. See, for example, films such as White Men Can't Jump, Fast Break, Hoosiers, Streets of Gold, Rocky I, II, III and Wildcats, television shows such The White Shadow, and advertisements such as Nike's take on the Twilight Zone featuring black basketball star Scottie Pippen and a host of inept white actors/players or Nike's dedication and desire themed commercial featuring white basketball star Dan Majerle and a few black actors/opponents whom he repeatedly outhustles and overwhelms with his heart and dedication to the game. For manifestations of similar racial stereotypes in non-sports related media productions see, for example, movie characters played by the black actor Stepin Fetchit, films such as Birth of a Nation, Gone with the Wind, Do the Right Thing, Weird Science and Mandingo, television programs such as The Amos and Andy Show, The Three Stooges and All in the Family, as well as advertising images such as "Aunt Jemima," "Uncle Ben" and the "Cream of Wheat" man.

## CHAPTER II

### RACE, RIVALRY AND RATINGS: THE INTERTWINING OF THE CAREERS OF LARRY BIRD AND EARVIN "MAGIC" JOHNSON

At a time when the league's television ratings and attendance figures were plummeting, Larry Bird's entrance into the NBA in the 1979-80 season was hotly anticipated by league officials. As a six foot, nine inch tall, 225 pound forward who possessed exceptional shooting range, rebounding skills and passing ability, Bird had been named the 1979 NCAA Player of the Year. Indeed, basketball purists regarded him as the most complete player to enter the NBA in many years, an opinion that did not change much over time.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the course of his career, a number of factors served to separate Bird from the vast majority of his peers and predecessors, both white and black. One such factor was something that he had first demonstrated in college, the ability to excel at many facets of the game. While other players might, for instance, shoot, dribble or rebound as well as Bird, none could do all three as well as he. As Sports Illustrated's John Papenек noted early in Bird's career, "no one playing the game today can do as many different things on a court as well as Larry Bird."<sup>2</sup> Another factor that made Bird a unique player was his ability to perform well under pressure. At the end of a game if a shot needed to be made, Bird always seemed to be the man who made it. As Sports Illustrated's Bruce Newman

noted, "Bird has almost always come through with big plays in important games."<sup>3</sup> In fact, his success in the clutch was so great that former Celtics' coach Bill Fitch once said that, "If the game is on the line and my life depended on it, I'd say give it to Bird."<sup>4</sup>

The third factor that granted Bird a place among the all-time greats was his unique ability to see the entire court in a glance, complete with all of its possibilities and pitfalls. As Papenек noted, Bird played as though "he not only sees everything as it develops, but also as though he sees everything *before* it develops."<sup>5</sup> Bird's vision was linked directly to the fourth factor that separated him from other players, his spectacular passing skills. As Sam Goldaper noted in Sports Quarterly's annual basketball special for the 1979-80 season, Bird could "whip the ball over his head or behind his back, throw it between his legs," as well or better than anyone in the game at the time.<sup>6</sup> In Courtside: The Fan's Guide to Pro Basketball, Gary Hoenig added to this conception of the Celtics' star when he noted that "as a passer, Bird has no peer,"<sup>7</sup> while in 1984 legendary Celtics' president Arnold "Red" Auerbach took this praise to an even higher level when he ranked Bird as "the best passing big man" of all-time.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite all of these abilities, league officials did not look forward to Bird's entrance into the NBA just for what he could do on the court. Citing an

unnamed NBA source, Super Sports writer Marv Schneider elicited this response as to why the NBA was so pleased to welcome Bird into the league: "'A majority of our fans are white, and let's face it, they don't have too many top white players they can relate to.'"<sup>9</sup> Schneider elaborated on the importance of having a white superstar in the league when he noted that "the predominance of black players, including most of the top stars, has been cited, no longer in whispers, as one of the main reasons for the NBA's problems with TV ratings and attendance."<sup>10</sup> Thus, from the moment he joined the league, Bird's existence as a basketball player was racialized. In essence, he was the "great white hope for the NBA."<sup>11</sup> As such, his dual role was to win games and sell tickets. The fact that he was very successful in both capacities only helped further his racialization as a player. As a result, although it was not something explicitly stated, by the time the 1984 Finals began, Bird's status as a champion of the Caucasian race was as fixed as was his status as one of the two best players in the league.<sup>12</sup>

"Magic" Johnson was the other premier player in the NBA at the time. Though not a great shooter, the six foot, nine inch tall, 225 pound Johnson excelled at multiple facets of the game as did Bird and, like the Boston star, was able to totally dominate a game by himself. As Pete Newell, former coach of the University of California and now the operator

of a successful skills camp for NBA centers, stated in 1984, "Magic is also probably the best there's ever been going from end to end. He can rebound it, dribble it and dunk it on you without any help at all."<sup>13</sup> However, like Bird, Johnson's true forte, the thing that separated him from the vast majority of his peers and predecessors, was his passing ability. In Courtside, Hoenig described Johnson as "a devastating passer who can slow it up and find the big man-- or any other open man--with a lightning flick of the wrist,"<sup>14</sup> while the 1984 Complete Handbook of Pro Basketball labeled Johnson "the master of the pass."<sup>15</sup> A league all-star in each of his three seasons and the owner of a championship ring, Johnson was, thus, arguably, every bit as dominating on the court as was Bird. As Boston Globe and Sports Illustrated sportswriter Bob Ryan put it prior to the 1984 Finals, "If you're talking about the greatest all-around player in the game, you're talking about Bird or Magic."<sup>16</sup>

Like Bird, Johnson also had a demanding dual role in the NBA. He was expected to help his team win games and help the league become more popular. And, like Bird, his performance on the court was just one factor in many that helped him to fulfill his role. Playing point guard, a position that was typically played by men six feet, three inches tall or less, Johnson was a physical oddity. Coupled with his passing skills, bright smile and outgoing

personality this fact rendered him a showman as much as a player. In the fashion of the Harlem Renaissance era and the Harlem Globetrotters, Johnson was a performer whom white people would pay to see because he was so talented and "exotic" in his person and style of play.<sup>17</sup> As Schneider noted, "Johnson, in addition to being a talented player, is show-biz. His unmasked enthusiasm. . . his quick feeds and his alley-oop passes excite crowds everywhere."<sup>18</sup>

Like Bird then, Johnson's existence as a basketball player was racialized from the instant that he entered the NBA. In effect, he held the status of "pepper" to Bird's "salt."<sup>19</sup> He was the other ingredient necessary to the rebirth of the NBA. He was the dark background against which Bird's whiteness could best be seen and, in the sense that Johnson was the only player in the league who played on Bird's level, he, too, held the status of a champion of his race.<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, Bird and Johnson developed a significant rivalry over the course of their careers. In fact, in the annals of basketball history, it was one of epic proportions. Writing of the decade of the 1980's in Elevating the Game, Nelson George describes the magnitude of the personal competition between the two players when he states that, "the central question of the age was 'Who was better, Bird or Magic?'"<sup>21</sup> George, of course, was not alone in his assesment of the rivalry. In an article written

prior to the start of the 1984 Finals, Sports Illustrated's Bruce Newman called the coming matchup between the two players "the sport's most eagerly anticipated confrontation" and noted that every move Bird and Johnson made on the court would be "studied, judged and compared on artistic impression and technical merit. . . and then hotly debated into the small hours from the corner bars of Brookline to the boites of Beverly Hills."<sup>22</sup> The Boston Globe's Dan Shaughnessy and the Los Angeles Times' Steve Springer also offered similar opinions on the scope of the Bird-Johnson rivalry prior to the start of the 1984 series as Shaughnessy noted that "The Magic vs. Bird debate will start fights in every sports bar in America,"<sup>23</sup> and Springer observed that the real attraction in the 1984 Finals was that it represented a chance to settle the "Best-Player-in-the-Game argument" that swirled around Bird and Johnson.<sup>24</sup>

In his autobiography Magic's Touch, Johnson elaborates further on the extent of the rivalry. "We were always being pitted against one another. If Larry accomplished something on the floor, everybody wanted to know why I couldn't accomplish it, too. Then if I did something, people bothered Larry about the same thing. Here we were thousands of miles apart on completely different coasts, and we were always having to answer questions about each other."<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, the public and media interest in the personal competition between the two players was augmented



by Bird and Johnson's ranking as the two best players in the league and the Celtics' and Lakers' ranking as the two best teams. The fact that the Boston and Los Angeles franchises were traditional rivals themselves surely added to this interest as well. However, it is impossible to overestimate the role that the issue of race played in the formation and perpetuation of the rivalry between the two players.

Because they had been polarized by the color of their skin since they had entered the league, the confrontations between Bird and Johnson on the court came to represent more than just basketball games in the eyes of many people. Like boxing matches between white and black fighters, the matchups between Bird and Johnson took on the aura of sanctioned race battles. As Harvey Araton and Filip Bondy note in The Selling of the Green: The Financial Rise and Moral Decline of the Boston Celtics, the on-court confrontations between Johnson and Bird amounted to confrontations of "Black versus white."<sup>26</sup> Writing of the Bird-Johnson rivalry in a Sports Illustrated article, Ryan also alludes to the role that race played in generating the enormous fan and media interest that existed in the matchups between Bird and Johnson. "Larry Bird, 6' 9", undeniably white. Earvin "Magic" Johnson, 6' 9", undeniably black. Does this matter? Hell, yes. It is part of the fun."<sup>27</sup>

The "fun," as Ryan puts it, had begun in the 1979 NCAA Championship Game. In that game, Bird's Indiana State

Sycamores lost convincingly to Johnson's Michigan State Spartans, 75-64. However, the concept of race warfare on the basketball court clearly had won. As Ryan notes, the game "got the highest television ratings of any NCAA championship game--before or after."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Araton and Bondy assert, the "racial sideshow" offered by the Bird-Johnson matchup helped the 1979 NCAA Final to play "as well in Peoria as it did in the heart of Watts."<sup>29</sup> As a result of this overwhelming success in 1979, the NCAA tournament was lifted to "a new level in American consciousness," a level that would eventually translate into a \$1 billion seven-year television rights contract with CBS in 1990.<sup>30</sup>

The 1984 NBA Finals represented the first time since the 1979 NCAA title game that Bird and Johnson would meet with a championship at stake. Having slowly but steadily risen in popularity since the 1979-80 season, the NBA was firmly back on its feet in 1984. In fact, it was poised to make the jump to the level of professional baseball and football in terms of national and international interest. From the joint perspective of the NBA and the media, with the abundance of simple conflict and difference that the Bird-Johnson and Celtics-Lakers matchups offered, the 1984 Finals represented the springboard. As Araton and Bondy noted in regard to the series, "The NBA could not have wished for better. Trends in the country were moving west to east, and out of Hollywood came the hip, young, black

Showtime Lakers. Out of New England came the defenders of tradition, a formidable response to the wave of black domination. Larry Bird was the white hope. His Celtics were the white alternative. Together, they sold big."<sup>31</sup>

Predictably then, the media coverage of the series was intense, especially in regards to the two rivals. Working from the notion that it meant one thing to be white and another thing to be black, the media repeatedly highlighted differences and drew distinctions between the two players.<sup>32</sup> Thus, to examine this coverage of Bird and Johnson in the 1984 NBA Finals and, by extension, the Celtics and Lakers, is to see the racialized ideology that underlies the sports news media's treatment of basketball in America at work. It is to see what American sports journalism says it means to be white and black and to see how it defines the nature of the relationship between the two.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. Papanek, J. "Gifts That God Didn't Give," Sports Illustrated, 9 November 1981, p. 84.
2. Papanek, p. 84.
3. Newman, B. "Together at Center Stage," Sports Illustrated, 4 June 1984, p. 43.
4. Fitch, B. as quoted in Newman, p. 40.
5. Papanek, p. 86.
6. Goldaper, S. "Bird-Watching Now Celtics Favorite Pastime," Sports Quarterly, Basketball Special 1979-80, p. 16.
7. Hoenig, G. (1984). Courtside: The Fan's Guide to Pro Basketball. Miami, FL: Vanderbilt Press, Inc., p. 112.
8. Auerbach, A. as quoted in Papanek, p. 86.
9. Schneider, M. "Behind the Scenes--What the NBA is asking of 'Magic' Johnson & Larry Bird," in Super Sports, April 1980, p. 71.
10. Schneider, p. 71.
11. NBC college basketball color commentator Al McGuire as quoted in Goldaper, p. 16.
12. George, N. (1992). Elevating the Game: The History & Aesthetics of Black Men in Basketball. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 222-5, makes a similar argument about Bird's status.
13. Newell, P. as quoted in Newman, p. 43.
14. Hoenig, p. 119.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER II, CONT.

15. Hollander, Z. (ed.) (1984). The Complete Handbook of Pro Basketball. New York, NY: New American Library, p. 224.
16. Ryan, B. as quoted in Newman, p. 38.
17. I use the word "exotic" in the sense of the cult of exoticism, a white interest in black arts and black life that existed in the Harlem Renaissance era. My understanding of exoticism stems, in part, from Hemenway, R. (1977). Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, p. 75-6.
18. Schneider, p. 71.
19. Mychal Thompson as quoted in Ryan, B. (1992). "The Two and Only," in Sports Illustrated, December 14, 1992, p. 46.
20. George, p. 227 makes a similar argument about Johnson's status.
21. George, p. 224.
22. Newman, p. 34.
23. Shaughnessy, D. "Finally--Celtics vs. Lakers," Boston Globe, 27 May 1984, p. 29.
24. Springer, S. "The Matchups," Los Angeles Times, 27 May 1984, p. 11.
25. Johnson, E. with Johnson, R. (1989). Magic's Touch. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., p. 191.
26. Araton, H. and Bondy, F. (1992). The Selling of the

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER II, CONT.

Green: The Financial Rise and Moral Decline of the Boston Celtics. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 114.

27. Ryan, p. 46.

28. Ryan, p. 49.

29. Araton and Bondy, p. 96.

30. Araton and Bondy, p. 96-97.

31. Araton and Bondy, p. 114.

32. This highlighting of differences in the Bird-Johnson rivalry was not limited to on court actions. For an example of the media's focus on off the court issues see Newman, p. 36 which makes mention of the fact that Bird lived in a relatively modest home and led a quiet life off the court while Johnson had a mansion and was a regular at Los Angeles night clubs. The media's tendency to draw distinctions between Bird and Johnson and pit them against each other as personal enemies also helped to keep the two players from developing a friendship early in their careers. For a brief discussion of this fact see Johnson, Magic's Touch, p. 191 and Newman, p. 36.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONSTRUCTING "REALITY": GOVERNING STATEMENTS AT WORK ON THE INDIVIDUAL PLAYER LEVEL

In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation," Louis Althusser argues that in any given society there are institutions, such as the educational system, the family and the media, that reproduce, support and distribute to the general public the ideology or myths, beliefs and values of that society's dominant group. According to Althusser, the overarching purpose of these institutions or "Ideological State Apparatuses" is to help maintain the current social formation or balance of power in that society.<sup>1</sup> The American sports news media's treatment of Larry Bird, "Magic" Johnson and other individual players from the 1984 NBA Finals illustrates and supports these notions.

As the ultimate example of the white athlete, Larry Bird was depicted throughout the 1984 NBA Finals by the American sports news media in terms of the "governing statement" white men cannot jump. He was, in a general sense, portrayed as someone who possessed little in the way of physical abilities. In an article appearing on the day of the first game of the series, Boston Globe sportswriter Dan Shaughnessy articulated this basic, prevailing view of the Celtics' star. "Bird is a slow, 6-9 nonleaper."<sup>2</sup> However, in a more specific sense, the media did not merely

describe Bird as a poor athlete. American sports journalists also depicted him as someone who was much less physically gifted than the black athletes against whom he competed. For example, CBS Sports' color commentator for the Finals, Tom Heinsohn, drew unfavorable comparisons between Bird's quickness and leaping ability and that of black Lakers' players Michael Cooper and James Worthy throughout the series.<sup>3</sup>

The media's portrait of Bird as a physically limited player, in general, and as a player physically inferior to his black opponents, in particular, was not an end in itself, though. Rather, it worked to foreground the "governing statement" white men can think. An article written after the conclusion of the series by Bob Ryan, then exclusively a Boston Globe sports columnist, renders this concept clear. In this article, Ryan grapples with the question of how Bird has become such a dominant player. By way of an answer he writes, "Larry Bird has neither good straight-ahead running speed nor above-average lateral movement. He is an average Caucasian jumper. . . In strict physical terms the computer would not identify Larry Bird as anything other than a marginal professional basketball player."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Ryan's article suggests that the Celtics' star succeeds on the court because of his intelligence.

However, the idea that Bird had strong mental abilities



was not something that was merely implied through the media's consistent disparagement of his physical skills. It often was something that was bluntly stated, itself.

Throughout the series Heinsohn and CBS broadcast partner Dick Stockton asserted that Bird was a number of mental steps ahead of many plays as they transpired on the court.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in explicit answer to his own question, Ryan wrote of Bird "he has a mind for the game. His basketball aptitude is in the upper 1/100 of one percentile."<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, as his passing skills and court vision suggest, Bird was a very smart basketball player. Moreover, by the standards of the NBA he was not a superb athlete since he was not an outstanding leaper, nor did he possess blinding speed. But, to suggest through the denigration of the Boston star's physical abilities and the praise of his mental abilities that he dominated play primarily on the basis of his intellect is an oversimplification at best and a racialized misrepresentation at worst. Put simply, a basketball player cannot achieve the success on the court that Bird did without possessing a unique blend of mental and physical talents.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, even in instances in which all of his talents were on display, the media tended to emphasize Bird's intelligence over his athletic ability. Indeed, his mental skills were often cited to the point where his physical accomplishments were ignored. This was especially true in

instances in which Bird competed directly and successfully against a black opponent. A column written by Boston Globe sportswriter Leigh Montville after Game Five of the series exemplifies this notion. Game Five was a game in which Bird physically dominated the Lakers, posting thirty-four points and seventeen rebounds. Yet, in his column Montville chose not to highlight any play of Bird's that reflected the strength that he demonstrated in securing all of the rebounds that he did or the dexterity that he demonstrated in scoring all of the points that he did. Rather, Montville chose to highlight a play in which Bird's intellectual skills were sharply and favorably contrasted with Worthy's physical skills. "Remember the dunk by the Lakers' James Worthy in the last game? Remember how Worthy spun past Bird, went underneath the basket and came around with a large arm to blast the ball through the rim? . . . Larry Bird remembered. In the third period, James Worthy took the same polar route toward the basket. . . Worthy came around and was nine-tenths of the way into his stop-the-clock slam. Oh-oh. The ball did not go through the basket. Larry Bird's hand was waiting to deflect the shot away. 'Fool me once, shame on you,' Larry Bird's hand said. 'Fool me twice, shame on me.'"<sup>8</sup>

Taken as a whole then, the media's construction of Bird was true to historical conceptions of racial identity. As a white man, Bird was portrayed as lacking in physical gifts,

but well-endowed in mental gifts. As such, his success on the court could be interpreted and presented as a reinforcement of historically hierarchical conceptions of race. More specifically, when recast as a triumph of white intellect over black physicality, Bird's success on the court served as subtle evidence to support the notion that the white race is inherently superior to the black race.

Of course, the media's tendency to draw distinctions between the physical and intellectual abilities of white and black players also can be interpreted, in part, as a response to the stereotypical notion of the "dumb jock." In that it characterizes athletes, in general, as "all brawn and no brain," this stereotype transcends race and places whites and blacks on the same plane, rendering them, in a sense, indistinguishable from each other. Since such a sense of similarity or equality between the two races is something that has been resisted for years, especially by white people, the need for the white dominated mainstream media to draw distinctions between white and black athletes is that much stronger. Consequently, these distinctions are drawn and the potential leveling effect of the "dumb jock" stereotype is overcome by portraying the white athlete in a way (mentally gifted, physically challenged) that clearly breaks away from the "dumb jock" stereotype while portraying the black athlete in a way (physically gifted, mentally challenged) that closely parallels that stereotype.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, like Bird, the on-court abilities of "Magic" Johnson, as well as those of Laker teammates Worthy and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, were also presented in terms of the statements that govern the American sports news media's representation of basketball. As black players, Johnson, Worthy and Jabbar were depicted by the media first and foremost as as men who could jump or as physical specimens. Ryan's profile of Johnson in a Globe article prior to the start of the series reveals this media tendency. "The inescapable fact concerning Magic Johnson is that he is 6 feet, 9 inches tall. He has the physique of a power forward, the finesse of a small forward and the quickness of a 6 foot guard."<sup>10</sup> Citing Johnson's height and ball-handling ability, Sports Illustrated's Bruce Newman carried on with the theme of Ryan's piece by likening the Laker star to a "freak at point guard" in an article appearing after Game One.<sup>11</sup>

On the day of Game Three, Ryan profiled Worthy in a similar vein. "What manner of man is this, who stands nearly 6 feet 10, who glides through the air like Dr. J, who rips down rebounds like Moses Malone, who runs the floor like Isiah Thomas. . . This man is James Worthy. . . the ultimate nightmare for opponents because he is too strong for small forwards and too quick for big ones."<sup>12</sup> Jabbar's physicality was similarly stressed by Los Angeles Times sportswriter Jim Murray prior to Game Five of the series.

"Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is one of the most awesome physical specimens this side of the Old Testament. . . After all, he's somewhere between 7 and 8 feet tall and somewhere between 240 and 300 pounds. He has the wingspan of a California condor. He also has a temper, finely tuned and ready for explosion at any time."<sup>13</sup>

As these descriptions of Johnson, Worthy and Jabbar imply, the inordinate attention that the media devoted to the physical prowess of the black athletes served to dehumanize them. Rather than being depicted as human beings who excelled at a sport, they were likened to frightening creatures or wild animals capable of amazing, superhuman feats. As such, their success on the court was not seen as a product of their dedication and hard work, but rather as a product of their inherent physical abilities.

Of course, the ironic aspect of the media's penchant for stressing the physicality of Johnson and Worthy, in particular, during the 1984 Finals is that their athletic gifts were, in truth, not overwhelmingly superior to those of the white Celtics' players with whom they were most often contrasted. In the case of Johnson and Bird, the difference in physical ability was negligible. Like Johnson, Bird stood six feet, nine inches tall and weighed about 225 pounds. Like Bird, Johnson possessed great peripheral vision, but neither superior foot speed nor leaping ability. In the case of Worthy and Celtics' forward Kevin McHale, each

player had clear physical advantages over the other. For instance, Worthy was very quick in the open floor and a great leaper. But, at six feet, eleven inches tall, McHale had a wingspan that nearly equaled Jabbar's and though not an exceptional leaper, was quick off his feet around the basket and moved well laterally.

Implicit also in the characterization of black players as physical specimens is the idea that black men cannot think, that they are unintelligent creatures, beasts capable only of action. As a result of these conceptions, the failings of black players on the court are often presented by the media as byproducts of their perceived intellectual deficiencies. Two sequences of plays involving Johnson and Worthy in particular, and the treatment that they received in the media illustrate this idea. In the first of these sequences, at the end of Game Two, Worthy threw a looping cross court pass that was stolen and converted into a game tying layup by Boston guard Gerald Henderson. On the ensuing Laker possession, Johnson dribbled the basketball too long and as a result the Lakers were unable to attempt a game winning shot before regulation time expired. The Celtics went on to win the game in overtime. In the second of these sequences, with a chance to attempt a game winning shot at the end of Game Four, Johnson repeated his Game Two act of dribbling the clock down too far. He then exacerbated the situation by throwing a soft pass to Worthy

that was stolen by Boston center Robert Parish. As a result, the game went into overtime. Down two points with only seconds left in the overtime period, the Lakers had a chance to tie the game, but Worthy threw a pass that was intercepted by Celtics' guard M. L. Carr who sealed Boston's victory with a breakaway dunk.

Admittedly, the errors made by Worthy and Johnson were critical. However, they did not stem from one simple root, such as that of an inherently inferior intellect. Rather, it is possible to interpret the errors as a combination of many factors, including poor judgment, poor execution, poor coaching, fatigue and pressure. Yet, given the racialized ideology that underlies American sports journalists' coverage of basketball and the media's tendency to simplify events, the mistakes made by the two black Lakers were essentially interpreted in only one way. Through the use of intellectually demeaning language they were presented on an explicit level as the product of Johnson and Worthy's lack of judgment and on an implicit level as the product of the two players' lack of intelligence.

For example, Sports Illustrated's Anthony Cotton characterized Worthy's Game Two pass as an "unclever" attempt.<sup>14</sup> The Boston Globe's Dan Shaughnessy went so far as to call it a "bonehead pass."<sup>15</sup> In their book Soar Like a Bird, James and Susan Peterson described Worthy's mistake as "a 'brain cramp.'"<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in a column written

after Game Four, Los Angeles Times writer Mike Littwin questioned Johnson's mindset and openly wondered in regards to the player's game-ending mistakes, "What was he thinking of."<sup>17</sup> CBS' Heinsohn suggested that, like Worthy's errors, Johnson's mistakes represented mental breakdowns.<sup>18</sup> By the same token, Shaughnessy labeled the Los Angeles star's faulty clock management at the end of Game Two as a "bonehead play," much as he had Worthy's miscue.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in Soar Like a Bird the Petersons also characterized Johnson's errors in the two games as they did Worthy's, calling each one a "'brain cramp.'" In fact, they even go so far as to offer the sarcastic prediction that, "Earvin will not make the NBA's all-time team of quick thinkers. They love him in Boston, however."<sup>20</sup>

The point that I am trying to make here is simple. Because they were black, the coverage afforded Johnson and Worthy's mistakes was more focused and caustic than it would have been if they were white. By the same token, due to the color of their skin, the errors committed by the two Lakers took on added significance. Rather than being depicted as isolated incidents, they were subtly presented as related manifestations of the intellectual inferiority of the black race. The irony in this media coverage is that prior to their errors Worthy and Johnson had each played quite well from both a physical and mental perspective. Never forcing a shot, Worthy had converted an amazing eleven of twelve



attempts from the field in Game Two and fourteen of seventeen attempts in Game Four en route to twenty-nine and thirty point nights, respectively. By the same token, Johnson had run the Lakers' offense with poise and confidence, posting the very impressive totals of twenty-seven points, ten rebounds and nine assists in Game Two and twenty points, eleven rebounds and seventeen assists in Game Four.<sup>21</sup>

In light of Worthy and Johnson's otherwise fine play, as well as the doubt cast on their intellectual abilities by the media, it is interesting to consider how the players, themselves, characterized their mistakes. "It was strictly a mental lapse" said Worthy in the wake of his errant pass in Game Two.<sup>22</sup> Writing of the 1984 Finals in his autobiography Magic's Touch, Johnson states "I blew two games in that series in the final seconds because. . . I wasn't mentally ready to handle the responsibility."<sup>23</sup>

These statements are significant and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. On an implicit level, this willingness on the part of the two black players to place the blame for their mistakes solely on their mental actions suggests that the media's representation of black players as intellectually weak is truly pervasive and powerful. Undoubtedly aware from watching television coverage of games and reading newspaper and magazines accounts that imply that black players are prone to mental mistakes, the two black

Lakers seem to automatically define their own errors as such. However, on an even more implicit level, Worthy and Johnson's classification of their errors as mental can be seen to indicate how important the intellectual side of the game really is to each of them. Johnson's words "I wasn't mentally ready" in particular, suggest that, as a black player, he is not oblivious to the intellectual dimensions of the game as stereotypes would suggest, but rather is acutely aware of the process of learning and development.

Of course, the anti-stereotypical implications of Worthy and Johnson's comments are somewhat submerged. The easier and more obvious interpretation of the players' statements suggests that such statements do not negate, but reinforce the stereotypical image of the black athlete as intellectually underdeveloped. It is one thing for a black player's actions to be labeled unintelligent by a white sports journalist, it is another thing for that black player to apply the label to his play himself. In some sense, the self-application implies that the black player agrees with the label. As a result, the label, or the larger ideology that suggests that black players, indeed black people, are intellectually deficient, can be positioned as more valid.

Certainly, decisions made on the basketball court are not infallible indicators of intelligence and should not be treated as such. Many otherwise smart people make foolish decisions on the court. Likewise, many otherwise foolish

people make smart decisions on the court. What basketball decisions often reflect most is not innate mental ability, but rather basketball acumen. And even then, this is not always the case.

For example, although Johnson and Worthy's mental abilities were frequently called into question in the media, the two Lakers were not, in terms of basketball knowledge, inferior to the white Celtics with whom they were most often contrasted. Like Bird, Johnson possessed tremendous court vision and court sense, skills that often translated into phenomenal passes and easy scores for teammates. Thus, constantly aware not only of where every player was on the court at a given moment, but also of where every player could be or would be in the next second, Johnson and Bird were the two smartest players in the league.

In a similar vein, as a graduate of the University of North Carolina, James Worthy came from one of the most disciplined college basketball programs in the country. Playing for legendary coach Dean Smith it was virtually impossible that he did not learn a great deal about the game. As a Laker, this background was reflected in that he played within the framework of the offense or ran plays as they had been designed to be run and seldom took bad shots. Having played hockey for much of his youth and attended the less basketball prestigious University of Minnesota, it is unlikely that Kevin McHale possessed more basketball

knowledge than Worthy or understood the finer points of the game any better. Known as "the Black Hole" to his teammates, McHale seldom passed up opportunities to shoot the ball. As a result, he was sometimes guilty of taking bad shots and ignoring play designs.

The fact then that there was not a dramatic gulf between the physical and mental ability of the black Lakers' stars and that of the white Celtics' stars suggests something important about the role of the American sports news media. Put simply, it implies that that media is in the business of creating "reality," a "reality" that will ostensibly appeal to the largest number of media consumers possible. However, as literary theorist Catherine Belsey argues in Critical Practice, what the media or any "Ideological State Apparatus" produces and disseminates, namely ideology, does not constitute any ultimate reality or absolute truth no matter how convincingly, consistently or relentlessly it is presented. Rather, it "obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence in the interests of the social relations generated by and necessary to the reproduction of the existing modes of production."<sup>24</sup> Thus, as the coverage of Bird, Johnson, McHale and Worthy indicates, what the newspaper,

magazine and television coverage of the 1984 NBA Finals offers in its historically predetermined, easily digestible definitions of whiteness and blackness is a version of "reality," a version that ultimately serves the dominant group.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. Althusser, L. (1969). "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation," in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, Brewster, B. (trans.), (1977), London, England: New Left Books, p. 141-43.
2. Shaughnessy, D. "Finally--Celtics vs. Lakers," Boston Globe, 27 May 1984, p. 29.
3. See especially CBS Sports, Game Three of the 1984 NBA Finals, 3 June 1984.
4. Ryan, B. "Bird: Franchise and Nonesuch Teammate," Boston Globe, 15 June 1984, p. 6 in pull out section, "Make That No. 15: A Tribute to the 1983-84 World Champion Celtics."
5. See especially CBS Sports, Game One of the 1984 NBA Finals, 27 May 1984.
6. Ryan, "Bird: Franchise and Nonesuch Teammate," Boston Globe, 15 June 1984, p. 6.
7. Physically, Bird possessed good size, a quick first step, tremendous peripheral vision and strong hands.
8. Montville, L. "Eyes of the Tigers," Boston Globe, June 1984, p. 28.
9. In some sense, it is possible to argue that Bird's public image as "the hick from French Lick [his Indiana hometown]" parallels the dumb jock stereotype. However, the more accurate interpretation of Bird's image might be that it is not a version of the dumb jock stereotype so much as

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER III, CONT.

it a version of the "innocent country boy" stereotype. This stereotype has been applied to white athletes over the course of history such as Danny Ainge, John Hannah and Butch Hobson. It positions white athletes as uninterested in fame, pure of spirit, simple in wants and needs and rich in common sense though perhaps poor in street and school knowledge. This stereotype can be contrasted with the stereotype of the "black city slicker" which describes black athletes as street smart, but ostentatious, arrogant and scheming and has been applied over the course of history to black athletes such as Earl Monroe, Walt Frazier and Barry Bonds. See Coakley, J. (1990). Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies. St. Louis, MO: Times Mirror/Mosby College Publishing, p. 339, 348, for a brief consideration of the "dumb jock" stereotype and George, N. (1992). Elevating the Game: The History & Aesthetics of Black Men in Basketball. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. xxi, 2 for a related consideration of the stereotypes of the "innocent country boy" and the "black city slicker."

10. Ryan, "Magic Powers," Boston Globe, 27 May 1984, p. 29.

11. Newman, B. "Together at Center Stage," Sports Illustrated, 4 June 1984, p. 43.

12. Ryan, "He's a Worthy Force Up Front for the Lakers," Boston Globe, 3 June 1984, p. 57.

13. Murray, J. "Why Are These Guys Trying to Mug Kareem?,"

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER III, CONT.

Los Angeles Times, 8 June 1984, Part III, p. 1.

14. Cotton, A. "The Lakers Put on the Breaks," Sports Illustrated, 11 June 1984, p. 59.

15. Shaughnessy, "Celtics Break Down, 137-104," Boston Globe, 4 June 1984, p. 31.

16. Peterson, J., and Peterson, S. (1984). Soar Like a Bird: The Story of the Celtics' 1983-84 Season and 15th NBA Championship. New York, NY: New American Library, p. 231.

17. Littwin, M. "No Magic Finish for Lakers, and Another Win Slips Away," Los Angeles Times, Part III, p. 10.

18. CBS Sports, Game Two of the 1984 NBA Finals, 31 May 1984; CBS Sports, Game Four of the 1984 NBA Finals, 6 June 1984.

19. Shaughnessy, "Celtics Take Back the Night," Boston Globe, 1 June 1984, p. 41.

20. Peterson, J., and Peterson, S., Soar Like a Bird, p. 232, 239.

21. Ryan, B. "Two and Only," Sports Illustrated, 14 December 1992, p. 48. See also, CBS Sports, Game Two of the 1984 NBA Finals, 31 May 1984 and CBS Sports, Game Four of the 1984 NBA Finals, 6 June 1984.

22. Worthy, J. as quoted in Springer, S. "This Time Magic Lets It Get Away," Los Angeles Times, 1 June 1984, Part III, p. 15.

23. Johnson, E. with Johnson, R. (1989). Magic's Touch.



## NOTES FOR CHAPTER III, CONT.

Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, Inc. p. 3.

24. Belsey, C. (1980). Critical Practice. London, England: Routledge, p. 57-8.

25. While I contend that the media's racialized coverage of basketball ultimately serves white people much more than it does black people, it is worth noting that such coverage can potentially have negative effects on white athletes.

Establishing a clear causal relationship is difficult, but, based on observations that I have made over the thirteen years that I have played organized basketball and the one that I have coached it, it seems that the media's tendency to highlight black physical abilities while simultaneously ignoring or maligning white physical abilities promotes failure or encourages, in some way, a level of mediocrity among white athletes. In other words, since black players are commonly seen as inordinately gifted with physical ability, the inability of white players to compete successfully against them is deemed excusable. As a result, prior to competition against black players, white players sometimes lower their goals and strive not to win, but merely to keep from being embarrassed. See Ryan, B. (1989). The Boston Celtics: The History, Legends & Images of America's Most Celebrated Team. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, Inc. p. 101; Chu, D. and Griffey, D. (1985). "The contact theory of racial integration: The

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER III, CONT.

case of sport," Sociology of Sport Journal 2 (4), p. 322-333; Althiede, D. and Snow, R., (1978). "Sports versus the mass media," Urban Life, 7 (2), p. 189-204; Chu, D. and Segrave, J. (1981). "Leadership Recruitment and Ethnic Stratification in Basketball," Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 5, Spring-Summer 1981, p. 13-22 for related observations about the effects of racial stereotyping.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONSTRUCTING "REALITY": GOVERNING STATEMENTS AT WORK ON THE TEAM LEVEL

While there are numerous individual examples to consider in the American news media's treatment of the 1984 NBA Finals, it is important to consider how the Celtics and Lakers were depicted as teams. Given the racially mixed rosters of the two squads, they were sketched in remarkably broad strokes. Drawing their identity largely from that of their marquee player Bird, the Celtics, whose twelve man roster included seven black players, became the white team. Defined in significant measure by their star "Magic" Johnson, the Lakers, whose twelve man roster included three white players, became the black team.<sup>1</sup> Predictably, the racialized identities of the two teams led the media to highlight the Celtics' intelligence and the Lakers' physical abilities. Thus, Boston was seen as mentally aggressive and as a team that made all the right strategic adjustments.<sup>2</sup> In turn, Los Angeles was seen as the greatest "collection of athletes in the league,"<sup>3</sup> a club that could outrun the "U. S. Olympic track and field team."<sup>4</sup> However, the racialized ideology implicit in the American sports news media's representation of basketball did not just manifest itself in the depiction of the Celtics as a smart team and the Lakers as an athletic team. It also showed itself in the way in which the Celtics were portrayed as a team of substance, but

not style, while the Lakers were portrayed as a team of style, but not substance.

Undoubtedly, this distinction between substance and style stemmed in part from perceived cultural differences between the cities of Boston and Los Angeles. Founded in 1630, Boston is a place rich in history and tradition. The site of important Revolutionary War conflicts such as the Battle of Bunker Hill, the city is a center of learning with numerous world-class colleges and universities and a center of culture with a well-established symphony orchestra, ballet company and multiple theaters. Renowned for its short summers and long, harsh winters Boston is home to almost 600,000 people. Once the cradle of Puritanism in the New World, the city retains a stoical, hard-working image as close to 50 percent of its workforce is involved in blue collar trade and manufacturing jobs. In contrast, Los Angeles, with its year round mild climate and multiple film studios is mythologized as a glamorous place in which personal freedom outweighs tradition and play is more important than work. Incorporated into the United States in 1850, the city has 19 television stations, 71 radio stations and is regarded as the show business capital of the world. The second largest city in the United States, Los Angeles has a population of 3.5 million people and over 40 percent of the city's workforce is involved in the white collar jobs of commercial services, municipal government and high-

technological industry.<sup>5</sup> However, the cultural differences between the cities of Boston and Los Angeles were not the only factors that influenced sports broadcasters and journalists to draw the distinction between substance and style that they did in their treatment of the Celtics and Lakers as teams. As Nelson George maintains in Elevating the Game, race also factors heavily in the drawing of such a distinction or, for that matter, in any discussion of "aesthetics" in the sport of basketball. His classifications of "classroom ball" and "schoolyard ball" serve to illustrate this point.

"Classroom ball" is a structured, disciplined approach to the game that has always been associated with white players.<sup>6</sup> Players that employ a "classroom" style approach the game of basketball like they would a science, as something that has inherent laws or principles that can be studied and learned. Once these principles are learned, formulas for success will become obvious, or so the thinking goes. If applied at the right times and executed properly, proponents of the "classroom" approach believe that these formulas, in turn, will not fail to produce the desired effect, namely, victory. "Schoolyard ball," on the other hand, is an improvisational, free-wheeling approach to the game that has always been associated with black players.<sup>7</sup> Players that employ a "schoolyard" style treat the game of basketball as an art, as something that has no predetermined

shape or order to it, except that which comes from within the player, himself. Every game, every play is its own entity, something to be dealt with or experienced individually when the moment arises, or so the thinking goes. For proponents of the "schoolyard" approach, self-expression, creation and experimentation represent the true essence of the game.

There is, of course, one final distinction between "classroom ball" and "schoolyard ball." "Classroom ball" assumes the existence and control of a coach over all aspects of the game and is, in effect, hierarchical in nature. "Schoolyard ball" assumes the absence of a coach and is, in effect, democratic in nature. In terms of the 1984 Finals, this distinction holds significance and irony. The Celtics, who were positioned as the "white" team and, thus, the "classroom" team throughout the series by the media were coached by a quiet, unassuming black man, K. C. Jones. The Lakers, who were positioned as the "black" team and, thus, the "schoolyard" team throughout the series by the media were coached by a brash, stylish white man, Pat Riley.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite these distinctions between Jones and Riley and despite the fact that white players such as Pete Maravich, Ernie DiGregorio, Rick Barry, Bob Cousy and Larry Bird have all evinced some aspects of the "schoolyard" style on a regular basis in games and black players such as

Maurice Cheeks, Joe Dumars, Buck Williams, Quinn Buckner and "Magic" Johnson have all evinced some aspects of the "classroom" style on a regular basis in games, the two approaches traditionally have been cast in opposition with the former having always been held in higher regard than the latter. The media's positioning of the Celtics as a team of substance, but limited style and the Lakers as a team of style, but limited substance reflects this traditional, racially weighted understanding of the two approaches to the game. The media's positioning of the two teams in this fashion is implicit throughout the newspaper, magazine and television coverage of the Finals. However, it can best be seen in a group of articles written by the Boston Globe's Leigh Montville between Games Four and Seven of the series.

For example, after a blowout Laker win in Game Three, Montville asserted that "The Celtics are always going to be the uglier team in this series--working inside, scoring pound-'em-out baskets against the Laker Swan Lake glides."<sup>9</sup> In the sense that the Lakers possessed a stronger fast break than the Celtics, had more players who excelled in the open court than the Celtics and had, in "Magic" Johnson, a creative, often spectacular performer, Montville's assessment has some legitimacy. However, certain facts about the two teams render his analysis ironic and, in a sense, an overstatement that hints at the racialized ideology that underlies the American sports news media's

treatment of basketball.

First of all, the Celtics possessed a potent fast break of their own. Indeed, throughout the Eastern Conference playoffs Boston had labored against physical teams like the New York Knicks that focused their defense on keeping the Celtics' fast break offense in check. Secondly, the Celtics had a dynamic, creative performer of their own in Bird who specialized in spectacular no-look, look-away and touch passes, not to mention long-range three-point shooting. Thus, the notion implicit in Montville's column that the Celtics were a team that lacked grace or scored all of their points down low in a workmanlike, "ugly" fashion is something of an exaggeration or caricature.

By the same token, while the Lakers preferred to run, they had a strong half-court offense of their own. Specifically, they had the slow-footed, seven foot-two inch tall, 245 pound Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, perhaps the greatest low-post scoring threat in the history of the game. Jabbar was a player who seldom ran on a fast break, let alone scored off one. Yet, somehow, on the supposedly run-and-gun Lakers, he still managed to average over twenty points per game. Moreover, the Lakers had a bruising inside power player of their own in the six foot, eight inch tall, 230 pound Kurt Rambis who was a specialist in the less than glamorous jobs of rebounding, interior defense and physical intimidation. Thus, the notion implicit in Montville's



column that the Lakers were strictly a finesse team or a team that was only able to score and function effectively in non-physical, open-court situations is also something of an exaggeration or caricature.

In Montville's account of the Celtics' overtime victory in Game Four the media's racialized portrayal of the Celtics as a team of substance and the Lakers as a team of style becomes more evident. "They did it with stronger willpower. . . 'Not so fast' they said to the hordes of Laker gazelles. . . the Celtics brought the game back to hard-rock, small-town-gym basketball. . . They made this an emotional, tough basketball game."<sup>10</sup> Implicit in this image of the Celtics playing "small-town-gym" basketball is the idea that the Lakers play urban-playground basketball. As George's concepts of "classroom ball" and "schoolyard ball" suggest, this characterization of the Lakers style of play amounts to black basketball. It also implies a value judgement. In the terms of Montville's description, black basketball is neither "tough" nor "emotional." Rather, it is a game for "gazelles," a game of speed, beauty and grace, a game of style that is aesthetically pleasing. But, ultimately, it is not a game of substance and thus, not rewarding in the end.

On one level, Montville's characterization of the Lakers in this article also suggests that there are contradictions inherent in the racialized way in which the

American sports news media covers basketball. Put simply, it is inconsistent or even illogical that the Lakers would be presented as lacking in toughness or emotion given the fact that the media consistently likened Laker players to monsters or wild animals for their physical powers and showmen or entertainers for their flamboyant style of play. It likewise is inconsistent or illogical that the Celtics would be depicted as well-endowed in toughness and emotion given the fact that the press consistently depicted Celtic players as physically limited and deliberate and controlled in their style of play.

However, when analyzed closely, it becomes clear that these contradictions do not really detract from the consistency of the media's portrayal of whiteness and blackness in the sport of basketball. Rather, in a hierarchical sense, they support it. These seeming contradictions function to reaffirm maligned white male physicality, indeed, manhood, to the point where the white man not only can be certain that he is a man, but also can be certain that he is ultimately more of a man than his physically gifted black opponent.

This was a point that Montville returned to in even more overtly racial terms on the day of Game Five. In his column of that day he likened the progression of the series to that of a "Rocky" film. "The script seemingly has been stolen from Sylvester Stallone's front mailbox and converted

into roles for tall people. So we make Apollo Creed into a basketball team, see? We have him dance and have a good time, wow the crowd, light the lights for all the early rounds. Then we get Sylvester working. A few good body punches to slow old Apollo down. A couple of breaks? All right, a couple of breaks, but mostly because Sylvester is coming, always coming, looking through the blood and never stopping. Sylvester's on the the way! The fight goes into the late rounds and who knows what happens?"<sup>11</sup> For anyone who has seen a "Rocky" film the answer is obvious. Through a display of toughness, willpower and true emotional desire, the white man overcomes the physical and aesthetic superiority of his black opponent and proves that he is truly the better man. Manhood, thus, comes to be seen not so much as a physical state, but rather as a psychological and emotional one. As such it becomes something that white men can lay greater claim to than black men.

Following up on his "Rocky" allusion after the Celtics had won Game Five, Montville elaborated on this notion of white manhood in a column entitled "Eyes of the Tigers," which was a reference to the hit song "Eye of the Tiger" from "Rocky III." "They [the Celtics] were determined to make the night a test of manhood as much as basketball. . . In every aspect of the 121-103 dismantling of the houseguests from Los Angeles, the Celtics were stronger, tougher, more forceful. That was their goal from the

beginning. Take the game. Force and more force."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the show of Celtics' force did not begin in Game Five. Rather, it had taken its first and most obvious form in the second half of Game Four in Los Angeles. Having been blown out in Game Three and trailing in the series two games to one, the Celtics found themselves losing by six points in the third quarter of the game. Unable to cut into the lead on their next possession, the Celtics watched as Laker forward Kurt Rambis received a lead pass and streaked toward the basket for what appeared to be another easy Laker transistion score. However, before Rambis could convert the basket and push the Laker lead to eight, Celtic forward Kevin McHale pulled him out of mid-air and slammed him to the ground. While a personal foul was called on the play a flagrant one was not. McHale was allowed to stay in the game and a tone had been set for the rest of the series. "Showtime" was over.<sup>13</sup> The Lakers' free-wheeling style, their habit of "floating and flying with ooohs and aaahs" and scoring on "magic carpet rides" would be met with physical punishment by the Celtics.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, that punishment would be more or less condoned by the game's officials and by the league, itself.

However, the idea of the game being a "test of manhood" as well as the ideas of the Celtics using force to "Take the game" from the Lakers and this force being condoned by those in power and lauded by the press speaks to more than just

the reductive characterization of the Celtics as a team of substance and the Lakers as a team of style. Rather, it reveals in large measure the historical underpinnings of the racialized ideology that underlies the sports news media's treatment of basketball in America. Principally, it exemplifies the notion that the maintenance of white supremacy is of utmost importance and supercedes all other concerns, including those of fair play.

Of course, white supremacy can generally be maintained simply through the exertion of the white man's alleged superior intellect. In a column written after the Celtics had taken a three games to two lead in the series, Bob Ryan expressed this notion. Explaining the key to the Celtics' resurgence in the series Ryan writes, "the Celtics. . . have challenged the Lakers to a complete battle of mind and muscle." As he goes on to imply, in such a battle, the white man will inevitably prevail. "Score one for the inherent basketball savvy of the Celtics, who realized that when engaged in a seven-game series, it helps to be flexible mentally as well as physically. . . Its a simple case of a smart team learning what it takes to defeat a physically gifted team."<sup>15</sup> However, as the series indicates, if "what it takes" is the use of force, then so be it. Moving from the narrow realm of basketball to the broader expanse of American culture, it is evident that this attitude is nothing new. As history has shown, from the white

perspective, the main thing often times has been to subdue the black uprising, to prevent the black man from overstepping his boundaries. Historically speaking, the physically forceful methods undertaken to achieve these ends, such as whippings and lynchings, were sanctioned in that they were frequently supported or overlooked by those in positions of authority, be it government or local officials. In fact, they were excused and sometimes even praised as testaments to the white man's will to maintain justice and order in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, the need on the part of white men, or in this case, a "white" team, to use force to secure victory in a confrontation with black men, or in this case, a "black" team, contradicts the media's standard image of the white man as physically inferior, yet, intellectually superior. It suggests that white intellect is not so great as imagined because it cannot achieve victory by itself. It also suggests that white physicality is not so poor as imagined because it can be employed to help secure such victory. Yet, in the hands of the American sports news media, the contradictions implicit in the Celtics' use of force were smoothed out. They were treated in a way that did not detract, but rather enhanced traditional notions of racial difference and racial hierarchy. Taking their cue then from those moments in history in which the use of force by white men against black men was praised as a testament to the

white man's will to survive and prosper in a chaotic world, American sports journalists glorified the Celtics' use of force as an indication of their superior will to win and their superior desire for success.

This media tendency is clear in a column written after Game Seven by Los Angeles Times writer Mike Littwin. In this article, Littwin initially notes that Boston "muscle and fought and hammered their way to an NBA championship." However, in quick fashion, he implies that the Celtics' use of physical force is, in fact, a manifestation of the Celtics' superior desire for victory. Citing Boston forward Cedric Maxwell's notion that the Celtics overcame the Lakers because they had "more heart and more desire" as a legitimate assessment, Littwin suggests that the Celtics might well have won the series because they "simply wanted it more."<sup>17</sup> Along the same lines, Sports Illustrated's Cotton noted that Boston's victory in the series amounted to "a prime example of the Celtics' work ethic."<sup>18</sup> In a column analyzing why the Lakers had lost the series, Los Angeles Times' writer Thomas Bonk agreed with Cotton's assessment when he argued that the Celtics had won through their superior effort and their devotion to hard work.<sup>19</sup> Even Laker coach Pat Riley excused the Celtics' physically punishing play by saying that the Lakers could improve themselves by copying the Celtics "appreciation for the work ethic."<sup>20</sup>

Work ethic is, of course, something of an intangible. It involves will and desire and is considered a great equalizer between those who possess talent and physical gifts and those who do not. As such, it is a quality that has naturally been attributed to white people over the course of American history. Thus, while the average white person might be physically challenged, this notion of the white work ethic suggests that he will still succeed in life because he will work hard at whatever he does. In fact, he will outwork everyone else at whatever he does and exceed his own potential.

Of course, the notion that the Celtics were industrious and hard-working carries with it the implication that the Lakers were, in some measure, lazy. This implication, in turn, has clear links to the stereotypical inverse of the concept of the white work ethic, namely black laziness. The image of black people as lazy, shiftless, avoiders of hard work has existed almost since the first days of slavery and is still common to American culture in the twentieth century. The concept of black laziness suggests that while the average black person might well be imbued with immense physical gifts and natural talent, he will nonetheless fail to succeed in life or will not live up to his potential because he will not work hard at whatever he does, opting instead to try to get by on talent and physical ability alone.<sup>21</sup>



Clearly then the notions of the white work ethic and black laziness as well as those of black style and white substance implicit in the media's treatment of the Celtics and Lakers as teams meshes well with the myths of black physicality and white intelligence implicit in the media's treatment of individual players in the 1984 NBA Finals. In effect, these notions help to round out the image of white and black people that is perpetuated and disseminated by the American sports news media. As a result of this cultivated image of whiteness and blackness, the fact that the Celtics defeated the Lakers four games to three for the championship takes on added significance. The Celtics' victory serves to reinforce the ideology of the dominant culture by subtly suggesting that the white race is inherently superior to the black race. After all, in a direct competition in which "The Laker's players fulfilled all their artistic promise, floating and soaring and gliding and styling at every opportunity," and "the Celtics grunted and groaned and huffed and puffed,"<sup>20</sup> the Celtics won. In what the media cast as an equally balanced confrontation between the embodiment of history's conception of blackness and the embodiment of history's conception of whiteness, whiteness prevailed.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1. George, N. (1992). Elevating the Game: The History & Aesthetics of Black Men in Basketball. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster makes similar assertions on p. 224 and p. xviii.
2. Cotton, A. "Green and White and Red All Over," Sports Illustrated 25 June 1984, p. 46.
3. Bonk, T. "The Lakers Need Some Adjustments to Reach the Top," Los Angeles Times, 14 June 1984, Part III, p. 1.
4. Springer, S. "Losing Doesn't Bother Celtics--Its the Embarrassment of It All," Los Angeles Times, 4 June 1984, Part III, p. 10.
5. See Hoffman, M. (Ed.) (1992). The 1993 World Almanac and Book of Facts. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, p. 612, 616 and Harris, W. & Levey, J. (Eds.) (1975). The New Columbia Encyclopedia. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, p. 340, 1612-13.
6. George, p. xviii.
7. George, p. xviii.
8. The man Riley had been hired to replace as head coach of the Lakers was Paul Westhead. Earvin "Magic" Johnson was believed by many to be instrumental in the firing of Westhead, a white coach with a more systemized style of play.
9. Montville, L. "Five Uneasy Pieces in LA's Cuckoo's Nest," Boston Globe, 4 June 1984, p. 34.
10. Montville, L. "It Was a Heart Attack," Boston Globe, 7

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV, CONT.

June 1984, p. 40.

11. Montville, L. "Stubborn, Still Standing--And Even Even," Boston Globe, 8 June 1984, p. 25, 28.

12. Montville, L. "Eyes of the Tigers," Boston Globe, 9 June 1984, p. 25.

13. George, p. xix.

14. Montville, "Stubborn, Still Standing--And Even Even," Boston Globe, 8 June 1984, p. 28.

15. Ryan, B. "Celtics' Turnaround Took Better Than Fair Play," Boston Globe, 10 June 1984, p. 70.

16. Williams, J. (1986). A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 120-31 and  
 Fredrickson, G. (1971). The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914. New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, p. 281  
 allude to these facts.

17. Littwin, M. "For Lakers, the Last Chapter in the Series that Got Away," Los Angeles Times, 13 June 1984, Section III, p. 1.

18. Cotton, "Green and White and Red All Over," Sports Illustrated, 25 June 1984, p. 45.

19. Bonk, "The Lakers Need Some Adjustments to Reach the Top," Los Angeles Times, Part III, p. 1, 14.

20. Riley, P. as quoted in Bonk, "The Lakers Need Some

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV, CONT.

Adjustments to Reach the Top," Los Angeles Times, Part III, p. 14.

21. It is worth noting that there is much irony implicit in these stereotypical notions of the white work ethic and black laziness, in particular. For instance, during the days of slavery black people did the bulk of the daily work, while white people, or those that held slaves, cultivated a life of relative ease and leisure. Moreover, even in the twentieth century, the argument can be made that the average black person has had to work harder for whatever he or she has in life than has the average white person. See Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind, p. 327-29, for a related discussion on the stereotypical perception of black people by white people and Williams, A Rage for Order, p. 29-30, 145 for a related discussion on the irony of racial stereotypes.

22. Ryan, B. "Celtics Rugged Play Dazed Flashy Lakers," Boston Globe, 14 June 1984, p. 57.

## CHAPTER V

### SAME PLAYS, DIFFERENT RESULTS: THE MAINTENANCE OF "REALITY" IN PROFESSIONAL BASKETBALL

The examples offered by the coverage of Bird, Johnson and Worthy as individuals and the Celtics and Lakers as teams are clearly suggestive of the way in which race influences the American news media's coverage of basketball. However, in order to understand the extent of the influence of skin color on such coverage, it is necessary to closely examine the media's treatment of instances in which similar plays were made, or not made, by players of opposite race. Foremost among these instances is the crucial game-tying steal made by Boston guard Gerald Henderson at the end of Game Two.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, the media did not give Henderson, a black man, his due. Certainly, he was praised for making a great play. However, this praise was tempered. For example, the headline of the Boston Globe's sports section the morning after the game did not cite Henderson's exploits but rather proclaimed "Celtics Take Back the Night."<sup>2</sup> In addition, in his account of the game, Dan Shaughnessy did not mention Henderson's steal until the third paragraph of his article and only then after noting that "The Celtics had more heroes than a Philadelphia deli."<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, in the praise that the Celtic guard did receive, his intelligence and judgement were never really cited. Rather, his athleticism was highlighted as he was

likened to a "water sprite on the move" who made a play that helped, but did not produce by itself, a critical Celtics' victory.<sup>4</sup> In fact, as is clear in the Peterson's account of the game in Soar Like a Bird, Henderson was credited more for "being in the right place at the right time" than anything else and his steal was considered more a fortuitous stroke of dumb luck than a savvy act of intelligence.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to this characterization of Henderson's performance, for instance, Bird made a similar steal in the waning moments of the 1987 Eastern Conference Finals between the Celtics and the Detroit Pistons. Down by a point and in danger of heading to Detroit for Game Six down three games to two in the best of seven series, Bird stole an inbounds pass and then fed Dennis Johnson for a game winning layup as time expired. Yet, while Bird's steal was very dramatic and undeniably of major importance it did not occur in the NBA Finals. Thus, it is difficult to place it on the same level as Henderson's play. However, placing Bird's action on the same level as Henderson's action is the least of what the media did. With Boston Globe sports section headlines screaming "Bird Steals the Night" and "Bird Steals it for Celtics,"<sup>6</sup> Bird and his play were exalted to the highest degree. In fact, the steal was blatantly presented as a testament to the white Celtic star's intelligence. As the Globe's Leigh Montville wrote of the play, "Luck? Yes. Celtics luck? Yes. Garden luck? Yes. Luck by design?

Also, yes. How was Larry Bird still thinking in that situation?. . . How did Larry Bird know he should do what he did?"<sup>7</sup>

Bird's game winning theft was also subtly presented as a testament to white superiority. Describing the steal as the product of "intangibles," Globe sports columnist Jackie MacMullan speculated that if the Detroit player who had made the fateful pass, black guard Isiah Thomas, had been "working against speed or agility or sheer jumping ability, maybe the ball never would have been thrown."<sup>8</sup> In other words, if Thomas had been working against another black player he might not have been duped into throwing the pass. The implication, of course, is that the Piston star's true error did not rest in throwing the pass, but rather in underestimating the powers of white intelligence as represented by Bird.

Thus, similar plays made by men of different skin color yielded different media coverage. As a white man, Bird was wildly embraced as the smart hero, the player who singlehandedly produced a big Celtics' win. In contrast, as a black man, Henderson was more or less perfunctorily cited as the lucky aid in securing what was an even bigger Boston victory.

Another example of the way in which race colored the American news media's treatment of similar actions by white and black players in the 1984 Finals involved the divergent

manner in which poor play by the Celtics' Kevin McHale, Robert Parish and Dennis Johnson was reported. In the case of Parish and Dennis Johnson, both black men, the press was vociferously unforgiving, allotting major portions of blame for Boston's losses in two of the first three games of the series to them. While, in the case of McHale, the press was silently forgiving, letting his bad play go basically unmentioned.

CBS' Heinsohn was highly critical of Johnson in particular. Throughout his call of Game Three, a game in which the Celtics were outscored forty-eight to sixteen when Johnson was on the floor, Heinsohn strongly hinted that the Celtic guard was "dogging it," or not putting forth full effort.<sup>9</sup> In his account of the game, as well as in a full column before Game Four, Shaughnessy added to the criticism of Johnson, who had managed to score only four points in Game Three, by stating that the player could well wear the "goat horns" for his terrible play.<sup>10</sup> The criticism of Parish was no less severe. Over the course of the first three games of the series, during which the Celtic center had averaged 13.3 points per game, there were three full stories on Parish's problems in the playoffs and numerous references to his inability to do well in the clutch. In his account of Game One, Shaughnessy described Parish's thirteen point, six foul performance as his "latest no-show" and said that the Celtic center "appeared to be on



Neptune for most of the afternoon."<sup>11</sup> Shaughnessy continued with this theme in his report of Game Three in which Parish had scored nine points stating that "it's increasingly clear that Parish is either hurt, tired or not a playoff ballplayer."<sup>12</sup> Given the tone of Bob Ryan's piece on the Celtics' center prior to Game Four there was little doubt that the last choice was the one that the media embraced. "Robert Parish basically operates at one high level during the season and another lesser level during the playoffs."<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the media assaults on the performance of Johnson and Parish after Celtic losses, the poor play of Kevin McHale, a white player of significant stature, was more or less overlooked or benignly treated. After scoring just thirteen points and missing two important free throws in Game Two and scoring just twelve points on five for thirteen shooting in Game Three, McHale's play was barely mentioned. In particular, nowhere was it implied that he was not putting forth total effort or that he lacked the fortitude to perform well in the playoffs. In fact, the only real mention of McHale's bad play came in a small paragraph in a daily Boston Globe article called "Celtics Notebook." "Celtics Notebook" was a small collection of minor developments from the series that did not warrant inclusion in major articles or columns. In essence it was filler or fluff and even there the criticism only amounted to a very brief contrast of McHale's shooting percentages at home and

on the road.<sup>14</sup>

The disparity between the criticism of Johnson and Parish on one hand and McHale on the other was so great that the Lakers' Worthy even spoke about it. In doing so he directly alluded to the racialized ideology that underlies the sports news media's representation of basketball in America. "It just goes to show how the system operates. They've [Johnson and Parish] been playing their hearts out while McHale has been next to invisible, but no one's said anything about him."<sup>15</sup>

Clearly then, race can play a significant factor in how the media interprets and represents individual actions. As has been the case since the early twentieth century, similar plays made or not made by white and black players often receive completely different media coverage. As the governing statements that I have identified imply, that is because whiteness is believed to mean something entirely different than blackness.

Interestingly though, while this binary configuration of race represents the cornerstone of the "reality" or "symbolic universe" constructed by the American sports news media, those alternate definitions of whiteness and blackness are not quite so rigidly set from the white perspective.<sup>16</sup> As the careers of Bob Cousy, Bob Davies, and Ernie Digregorio indicate, white players can appropriate aspects of blackness or play in what is perceived to be a

black way without being condemned. However, that does not mean that blackness, itself, is overtly accepted. Rather, it simply means that the notion of what it means to be white is enlarged. For instance, if a prominent white player comes to dribble or pass like a given black player does, the previously derided style of dribbling and passing practiced by the black player comes to be labeled by the mainstream media as acceptable actions for white players, although, as the career of Dwayne "Pearl" Washington indicates, still not necessarily so for black players. Moreover, as was the case with Cousy and Pete Maravich, the white practitioner comes to be viewed as the best at such dribbling and passing.

Of course, the media's tendency to exalt the white practitioner while denying credibility to the black practitioner serves a specific purpose. It rationalizes an implicit white interest in blackness, an interest not unlike that evinced in the white fascination with black bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It suggests to white people that their interest is really in the white player and what he can do, not the black player and his style of play. As a result, the implicit interest can be indulged without any damage to the hierarchical and oppositional view of race that is explicitly maintained by the media.

A consideration of the way in which the acceptable definition of whiteness in basketball is enlarged also

reveals that this sport-specific process is, in some sense, indicative of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. According to T. J. Jackson Lears in "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," Gramsci formulated the notion of cultural hegemony as a way to address the relationship between power and culture.

Although no precise definition of cultural hegemony can be found in Gramsci's work, as Lears notes, the notion that hegemony is "'the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group,'" functions more or less in a definitive capacity.<sup>17</sup> However, as Lears adds, this would-be definition does not address the concept in its complexity. This is because, for Gramsci, domination or control by a ruling group or class represents not a static condition but more an ongoing process in which counterhegemonic alternatives or values, ideas and experiences opposed to or differing from those of the ruling group, arise to challenge the status quo. Consequently, hegemony is something that must constantly be maintained and the key to this maintenance rests in the ability of a ruling group to deal with these counterhegemonic alternatives.

As Lears implies, one such way in which they can be dealt with is through a subsumption of sorts. As Lears notes, "The line between dominant and subordinate cultures is a permeable membrane, not an impenetrable barrier."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in the effort to maintain hegemony, counterhegemonic alternatives, such as a black style of play in basketball, are sometimes simply appropriated by the dominant culture or made part of it, no longer alternative, but mainstream. While this appropriation changes the complexion of the dominant group in some way, it does not alter the balance of power. In part, that is because this appropriation provides the subordinate group with a sense of identification with the dominant group, a feeling that, to some extent, subverts their desire to challenge or change that group.<sup>19</sup>

The way in which Boston Celtics' legend Bob Cousy and his creative and entertaining style of play were embraced is perhaps the best example of the concept of cultural hegemony or of the way in which the media's definition of whiteness can be enlarged through the appropriation of aspects of blackness in basketball. However, the 1984 NBA Finals offer a significant example as well, namely, the practice of "trash-talking." Designed to "demoralize opponents by demeaning their intelligence, judgement, self-respect, manhood, and overall claims to humanity," "trash talking," in its most basic and common form, consists of verbal confrontational exchanges between opposing players on the court.<sup>20</sup> However, the practice is not just a spoken one. It also often involves the use of body language in the form of derogatory or incendiary hand gestures, such as the choke sign. At the NBA level at least, the practice is also

frequently carried on off the court by opposing players who wage verbal warfare through the media.

As Nelson George suggests in Elevating the Game, "trash-talking" is an integral part of the "African-American aesthetic" as it manifests itself in the sport of basketball. Akin to the black tradition of trial by insult known as "playing the dozens," "trash-talking" is a practice that is embraced by many black players. However, it is also a practice that has been traditionally denigrated by the American sports news media. As George notes, black players who engage in this practice are often derided for being arrogant and obnoxious. They are also seen as selfish players who place team victory below the personal glorification obtained through the ridicule of their opponents.<sup>21</sup> A brief consideration of recent events in basketball indicates that this negative appraisal of black "trash-talking" is quite prevalent today. During May of 1993 alone, two major articles were written about black New York Knicks' guard John Starks in which it was strongly implied that his future as a player rested squarely on his ability to control his "trash-talking" tendencies.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, in a Sports Illustrated article that reported on the early December rematch between the two teams that vied for the 1992 NCAA Championship, Duke and Michigan, the predominantly black Michigan squad was snidely ridiculed for its penchant for "talking trash."<sup>23</sup>

In the 1984 Finals, however, "trash-talking" was viewed in a different light. In essence, this was because the bulk of such talking was done by the team cast as white in the series, the Celtics. Led by Larry Bird as well as white teammate Kevin McHale and black teammates Cedric Maxwell and M. L. Carr, the Celtics taunted the Lakers every chance they got, both on and off the court. For example, after making shots Bird often yelled words to the effect of "you can't cover me! you can't cover me!" in the face of whichever Laker happened to be guarding him at the time.<sup>24</sup> Prior to Game Five, McHale made a point of telling the Los Angeles media that the Lakers "cried" too much about his rough play.<sup>25</sup> At the end of Game Four, Maxwell made choking gestures at Worthy before the Laker attempted two crucial free throws.<sup>26</sup> Carr wildly waved a white flag during Celtic surges throughout the series and, at the end of Game Four, told Worthy that he had no chance whatsoever of making his free throws.<sup>27</sup>

In effect then, the Celtics displayed all of the arrogance and obnoxiousness for which black "trash-talkers" are disparaged. Yet, they and their behavior were not condemned. Rather, with the exception of outlets in Los Angeles which primarily focused their efforts on analyzing and criticizing the Lakers failure, the media praised the Celtics for being a cocky, swaggering team. The Boston Globe called them "tough-minded, pushy, cocky and eminently

lovable,"<sup>28</sup> as well as a bunch of "wild and crazy guys."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Sports Illustrated said Maxwell and Carr, in particular, had not been unsportmanlike, but rather had merely hit their "verbal stride" in the series.<sup>30</sup> Bird, too, was embraced. Renowned as a player who was good enough to tell an opponent what he was going to do to him before he did it, his verbal antics were viewed as part of his legend. As a result, for awhile in the mid to late eighties, "trash-talking" received much favorable treatment in the media. In fact, NBA Entertainment, the promotional leg of the NBA, eventually produced a commemorative videotape on Bird's career in which he was labeled the "greatest trash-talker of all-time."<sup>31</sup>

However, with Bird's retirement, the media's position on such talk has begun to change. Although "trash-talking" spread rapidly through the NBA in the eighties and black players like the Minnesota Timberwolves' Chuck Person, the Indiana Pacers' Reggie Miller and the Phoenix Suns' Charles Barkley, in particular, continue to talk today in much the same fashion that Bird did in his prime, without a premier white practitioner the practice is beginning to lose its stamp of approval. As the Starks' articles and the story on Michigan indicate, it is lapsing into something of a state of disfavor.

Like the way in which "black" play was adopted through the embrace of the style of play practiced by Bob Cousy



then, this denigration of "trash-talking" also illustrates a way in which cultural hegemony is maintained. More specifically, the case of "trash-talking" represents an instance in which the threat to hegemony posed by a counterhegemonic alternative is removed via public labeling rather than subsumption. Through the ridicule of "trash-talking" in the media, the idea or experience of a subordinate group that "trash-talking" represents is invalidated. A verbal form of black creativity and empowerment is disabled and, as a result, the balance of power is maintained.<sup>32</sup>

In one sense then, the fall from grace that the practice of "trash-talking" has suffered and is suffering in the eyes of the media in the wake of Bird's retirement actually demonstrates more graphically the permeability implicit in the media's presentation of whiteness than does the example offered by the way in which Cousy's "black" playing style was permanently embraced and adopted. The recent decline in media respect for "trash-talking" shows that aspects of blackness can be discarded as easily as they have been appropriated. This haphazard treatment, in turn, suggests an implicit arrogance and self-absorption on the part of the white-dominated media in which the regard for various aspects of blackness rests less in their own merits than it does in their relevance to the white world and white media consumers.

Thus, as the example offered by the media's treatment of "trash-talking" as well as that offered by the media's treatment of Henderson and Bird's steals and Parish, Johnson and McHale's poor play indicates, race influences the press' coverage of basketball in America. It leads print and broadcast sports journalists to represent similar actions by white and black players in dissimilar ways. This coverage, in turn, reflects historical notions of racial difference and hierarchy and in its frequency and consistency both helps to maintain the hegemony of the dominant culture and establish race as an uncomplicated and easily accessible frame of meaning for media consumers.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER V

1. Araton, H. and Bondy, F. (1992). The Selling of the Green: The Financial Rise and Moral Decline of the Boston Celtics. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 143-49, focuses on Henderson's steal in a similar way.
2. Boston Globe, 1 June 1984, p. 41.
3. Shaughnessy, D. "Celtics Take Back the Night," Boston Globe, 1 June 1984, p. 41.
4. Montville, L. "Celtics Grand Theft Motto," Boston Globe, 1 June 1984, p. 43.
5. Peterson, J., and Peterson, S., Soar Like a Bird: The Story of the Celtics' 1983-84 Season and 15th NBA Championship. New York, NY: New American Library, p. 231.
6. Boston Globe, 27 May 1987, p. 47, 53.
7. Montville, L. "Bird's Final-Seconds Theft Saves Boston, 108-107," Boston Globe, 27 May 1987, p. 1.
8. MacMullan, J. "A Lost Cause is Saved," Boston Globe, 27 May 1987, p. 47.
9. CBS Sports, Game Three of the 1984 NBA Finals, 3 June 1984.
10. Shaughnessy, D. "Celtics Break Down, 137-104," Boston Globe, 4 June 1984, p. 34.
11. Shaughnessy, D. "Lakers Break Faster, 115-109," Boston Globe, 28 May 1984, p. 33.
12. Shaughnessy, "Celtics Break Down, 137-104," Boston Globe, 4 June 1984, p. 34.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER V, CONT.

13. Ryan, B. "It Happens Every Spring: Parish's Playoff Problems, Boston Globe, 6 June 1984, p. 33.

14. Shaughnessy, D. "Celtics Notebook," Boston Globe, 6 June 1984, p. 37.

15. Worthy, J. as quoted in Cotton, A. "They Took It Down to the Wire," Sports Illustrated, 18 June 1984, p. 24.

During the 1987 NBA Playoffs black Detroit Pistons' guard Isiah Thomas showed similar cognizance of the racialized ideology that underlies the American sports news media's depiction of basketball when he stated that if Larry Bird were black "he'd be just another good guy." Unlike Worthy's statement, however, Thomas' words received major attention. As a result, although his larger point that the press treated white and black players differently was legitimate, it was, for the most part, lost in the furor generated by his perceived insult of Bird. In fact, the outcry was so great that the NBA hastily arranged a press conference in which Thomas could qualify, if not retract, his statements. See McCallum, J. "The Mystique Goes On," Sports Illustrated, 8 June 1987, p. 31, for a brief account of this incident.

16. I use this term in the sense that T. J. Jackson Lears does in "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," in American Historical Review, Vol. 90, No. 3, June 1985, p. 573, to mean a view of the world designed "to make life understandable and tolerable." In that a

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER V, CONT.

"symbolic universe" does not represent reality, but rather a version of it, the term has clear ties to Belsey's concept of ideology.

17. Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks, Hoare, Q. and Smith, G. N. (ed. and trans.) New York, NY, p. 12 as quoted in Lears, p. 568.
18. Lears, p. 574.
19. Lears, p. 576.
20. George, N. (1992). Elevating the Game: The History & Aesthetics of Black Men in Basketball. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. xvi.
21. George, p. xviii.
22. See McCallum, J. "Hot Hand, Hot Head," Sports Illustrated, 17 May 1993, p. 23-4 and Aldridge, D. "Starks's Rise Dunks Home the Point," Washington Post, 27 May 1993, p. B1, B3.
23. Wolff, A. "Duke Makes a Statement," Sports Illustrated, 14 December 1992, p. 14-20.
24. See Bird, L. with Ryan, B. (1989). Drive. New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., p. 134, 142-3 for discussion of his on and off court talking.
25. McHale, K. as quoted in Springer, S. "Bird Blames the Commissioner," Los Angeles Times, 11 June 1984, Part III, p. 14.
26. CBS Sports, Game Four of the 1984 NBA Finals, 6 June

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER V, CONT.

1984.

27. CBS Sports, Game Four of the 1984 NBA Finals, 6 June 1984; Carr, M. L., as quoted in Springer, S. "Boston Puts Chokehold on the Lakers," Los Angeles Times, 7 June 1984, Part III, p. 1.

28. Ryan, B. "Celtics' Rugged Play Dazed Flashy Lakers," Boston Globe, 14 June 1984, p. 63.

29. Montville, L. "A Bunch of Wild and Crazy Guys," Boston Globe, 14 June 1984, p. 57, 62.

30. Cotton, A. "Green and White and Red All Over," Sports Illustrated, 25 June 1984, p. 46.

31. NBA Entertainment/CBS Fox Video Sports, Larry Bird: A Basketball Legend, 1991.

32. The threat to white hegemony posed by "trash-talking" is complex. In essence, the practice establishes black players as principal arbiters of basketball ability and disseminators of criticism. By so doing, "trash-talking" in a sense, decreases the importance of sports journalists, broadcasters and coaches, the vast majority of whom are white. See Lears, p. 572, for a discussion of labeling as a method by which cultural hegemony can be maintained.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, basketball's premier players are international celebrities, its trading card and merchandise sales are skyrocketing and its television ratings are at an all-time high. Played, watched, listened to and read about across the nation by millions of people from all walks of life, basketball is, in effect, well on its way to becoming the most popular sport in America, if it is not so already.<sup>1</sup> As Washington Post columnist Tony Kornheiser has put it, "Basketball is exploding all around us--faster and more fluid than baseball; nearer and less warlike than football. It's becoming our national pastime because it has the built-in urgency of a clock, and the high-speed rhythm of a modern ballet. It's exactly what we see ourselves to be: an America of the lithe and cultured."<sup>2</sup> Given these facts, the need to examine the sport and the way it is represented by the media is unquestionable. Basketball has simply become too big for those interested in the study of American culture, media and sports to ignore. Thanks to its growing stature among the American public, the sport warrants close consideration from a variety of academic disciplines and perspectives.

As my work indicates, when explored and analyzed in Michel Foucault's terms as a "discourse" comprised of specific governing statements, it becomes apparent that an ideology, rooted in America's historical conceptions of

race, underlies the news media's representation of basketball in America. However, according to this ideology, there is no unified or collective American "us" as Kornheiser suggests through his use of the pronoun "we," or at least none that is openly acknowledged. Rather, there is the white race and the black race. Inherently different, the two races are also inherently unequal with the white race ultimately ranked above the black race. According to this ideology, basketball is also not a smooth and unique blend of white and black culture as Kornheiser's notion that the game "has the built-in urgency of a clock, and the high speed rhythm of a modern ballet," subtly implies. Rather, basketball is a paradoxical dichotomy. It exists not simply as basketball, but as white basketball and black basketball, two interrelated, but oppositional entities.

In specific terms, as the media's depiction of Larry Bird and the Boston Celtics throughout the 1984 NBA Finals reveals, to be white is to be physically limited and lacking in style, yet mentally gifted and full of substance. While as the media's depiction of "Magic" Johnson and the Los Angeles Lakers throughout the 1984 NBA Finals reveals, to be black is to be physically gifted and full of style, yet mentally limited and lacking in substance. Ultimately, as the coverage of the series, itself, suggests, physical gifts and style are not the equal of smarts and substance and, by extension, black men are not the equal of white men.



However, given the fact that the Celtics prevailed in the 1984 Finals, an interesting question arises in relation to the American sports news media's coverage of basketball. Namely, would such coverage have been different if the Lakers had won? Would the notions of racial difference and racial hierarchy implicit in the press coverage of the 1984 Finals be maintained in an instance in which a reputed black team led by a black star defeated a reputed white team led by a white star in head-to-head competition? A brief look at the 1987 NBA Finals between the Celtics and Lakers suggests that it would.

In this series, "Magic" Johnson's Lakers defeated Larry Bird's Celtics with relative ease, four games to two. However, unlike the Lakers' defeat in the 1984 series, the Celtics' defeat in the 1987 series did not serve as evidence in support of a racial hierarchy. Lacking depth, riddled by injuries and having barely surmounted the Detroit Pistons in the Eastern Conference Finals, the Celtics attempt to win their seventeenth NBA championship was likened to an epic quest against impossible odds and obstacles. As such, the Celtics, themselves, were romanticized by the print and broadcast media as gallant and valiant knights who, though facing a near certain defeat at the hands of the healthier and deeper Lakers, competed with ardor and determination throughout.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, in defeat, the Celtics were seen to die a noble death, having gone out fighting against an

opponent that, like the mythical dragon, was so frightening and overwhelming in its power that to stand up to it was a victory in itself.<sup>4</sup> Thus, rather than detract from the historical notion of white supremacy or the stereotypical notions of the differences between the white and black race, the press coverage of the 1987 Finals rendered the Celtics' death or defeat in the series a perpetuation of such ideas.<sup>5</sup>

An examination of Sports Illustrated's coverage of the 1987 NBA Finals makes clear this view of the Celtics, the Lakers and the series, itself. Calling the Lakers' "the best 94-by-50 foot track team in existence,"<sup>6</sup> and likening their style of play to a "sudden, explosive charge" that had the effects of a "blitzkrieg" on opponents, Jack McCallum argued that the Boston squad was "tough" and deserved much praise and admiration just for standing in and competing against the Lakers. "Though they perished in the firepower of the Lakers' incandescent third period Sunday, they went out kicking. Yes, they were old and slow and injured, but they were still there after all those blips--the Hawks, the Pistons, the Bucks, the Mavericks--had flashed across the NBA radar screen and disappeared."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, as the coverage of the 1987 NBA Finals reveals, even in a case where a "black" team defeated a "white" team, press coverage of basketball underwent no substantial change. Historical notions of racial differences were still articulated and historical notions of racial hierarchy were

still maintained. Of course, like their own coverage in 1984 as well as that of the Boston Globe, Los Angeles Times and CBS, Sports Illustrated's coverage of the 1987 NBA Finals was handled exclusively by white men. Consequently, one obvious question remains. Namely, would black members of the American sports news media treat the sport of basketball in the same racialized way? A brief examination of Earvin "Magic" Johnson's commentary for NBC Sports' coverage of the 1993 NBA Finals between the Chicago Bulls and the Phoenix Suns suggests that they would.

Throughout the series, Johnson repeatedly fell back on stereotypical descriptions of white and black players. For example, in terms of his treatment of white players, whenever Bull's guard John Paxson, Suns' forward Dan Majerle or Suns' guard Danny Ainge was on the court, Johnson inevitably praised them for their intelligence, work ethic and overall substance as players. By the same token, he often suggested that their athletic ability was somewhat limited and that their style of play was not aesthetically pleasing.<sup>8</sup> However, while Johnson's assertion that the three white players were hard workers was accurate, his assertion that all three were highly intelligent, athletically and stylistically limited players was not. For instance, Majerle had competed in the NBA's Slam Dunk contest a few seasons earlier and had earned the nickname of "Thunder Dan" in Phoenix for his loud, wild dunks and

athletically explosive play. Similarly, those close to Ainge, such as former Celtics' teammate Kevin McHale, long had regarded him as a relatively undisciplined and thoughtless player who succeeded in the league primarily due to his extraordinary athletic ability.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of his treatment of black players, Johnson adhered to the racialized ideology that underlies the representation of basketball in America just as closely.<sup>10</sup> For example, when Suns' forward Richard Dumas scored, grabbed rebounds or stole the ball, Johnson praised the player for his tremendous athletic ability. However, when Dumas missed shots, was beaten on defense or turned the ball over, Johnson criticized his understanding of the game and his ability to grasp the intellectual nuances that it offers. By the same token, Johnson praised the athletic skills of Suns' center Oliver Miller and Bulls' center Stacey King while questioning their work ethic. The former Laker star also questioned the decision-making skills of Bulls' guard B. J. Armstrong and the mental toughness and decision-making skills of Suns' guard Kevin Johnson.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, in one sense, the idea of Johnson, a former player, using the reductive, racialized terms common to the American sports news media's treatment of basketball to describe other players, particularly other black players, is surprising. However, in light of Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, it is not. Gramsci has argued that

subordinate groups can often inadvertantly share some level of complicity in their subordination by accepting as real some or all of the inescapable ideology of the dominant culture.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Johnson's internalization and recapitulation of the racialized ideology that underlies the American sports news media's treatment of basketball can be understood as an illustration of this process at work, not some unexplainable aberration.<sup>13</sup>

All in all then, given the examples offered by the coverage of the 1984, 1987 and 1993 NBA Finals as well as the fact that basketball is more popular and more financially successful today than it has ever been in the past, it does not seem likely that the treatment of the sport by the American sports news media will undergo dramatic or tangible changes anytime in the near future. However, that is not to say that such coverage can never change. As Foucault suggests, while "The idea of a single break suddenly, at a given moment, dividing all discursive formations. . . cannot be sustained," the idea of a gradual alteration bringing about significant changes can be sustained (175). Spurred then not by a cataclysm such as, for example, the temporary removal of sports coverage from mass media outlets, but by small "ruptures" (175) or shifts in ideological perspective occasioned by factors such as increased academic attention and, perhaps, increased black representation among American sports journalists, the print

and broadcast media's coverage of basketball in America can be transformed over time.<sup>14</sup> It can be altered in such a way that historical conceptions of racial differences and racial hierarchy will no longer color the representation of white and black players and their respective actions on the court to the extent that they did in the 1984 NBA Finals. It can be altered in such a way that it will become obvious to media consumers nationwide that black men can have substance and white men can have style, that black men can think and white men can jump.

## NOTES FOR CONCLUSIONS

1. McCleary, K. "Is this the New National Pastime?," Boston Sunday Herald, USA Weekend Pullout Section, 6 June 1993, p. 4-6.
2. Kornheiser, T. "They Play Off Somewhere Else," Washington Post, 22 June 1993, p. C6.
3. See, for example, CBS Sports, Game One of the 1987 NBA Finals, 2 June 1987.
4. See, for example, CBS Sports, Game Six of the 1987 NBA Finals, 14 June 1987.
5. Having exhibited, according to the media, the same qualities in defeat (intelligence, fortitude and desire) that they had in victory, the Celtics loss in the 1987 Finals could be seen as an aberration owed strictly to injuries and circumstances beyond the team's control and, thus, not as damage to the notion of white superiority.
6. McCallum, J. "Crunch Time," Sports Illustrated, 15 June 1987, p. 19-23.
7. McCallum, J. "Your Ball, L.A.," Sports Illustrated, 22 June 1987, p. 15-21.
8. See especially NBC Sports, The 1993 NBA Finals: Game One, NBC Sports, The 1993 NBA Finals: Game Three, NBC Sports, The 1993 NBA Finals: Game Five.
9. Ainge's athletic ability was so substantial that for a time, he played professional baseball for the Toronto Blue Jays organization and contemplated joining the Professional

## NOTES FOR CONCLUSIONS, CONT.

Golfer's Association Tour.

10. A notable exception to Johnson's treatment of black players was his treatment of black Bulls' superstar Michael Jordan and black Suns' superstar Charles Barkley. In the case of those two players, each of whom is a close personal friend of Johnson, the former Laker was highly complimentary citing, in addition to each player's athletic abilities, their work ethic, mental toughness and inherent intellectual understanding of the game.

11. See especially, NBC Sports, The 1993 NBA Finals: Game One, NBC Sports, NBC Sports, The 1993 NBA Finals: Game Two, NBC Sports, The 1993 NBA Finals: Game Three.

12. Gramsci as analyzed in Lears, T. J., "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," p. 573.

13. It is arguable that Johnson's racialized commentary is not unlike Sidney Deane's warning to Billy Hoyle that white men cannot jump in the film White Men Can't Jump as both the words of the former Laker and the words of the fictional character can be seen to reflect an internalization and recapitulation of the racialized ideology that underlies the American sports news media's treatment of the sport of basketball. Furthermore, it is arguable that Johnson's broad-ranging popularity as an athlete, a celebrity and an announcer stems in part from his ability to talk this "white" talk or communicate in a way that is familiar to



## NOTES FOR CONCLUSIONS, CONT.

white media consumers.

14. The work of Sports Illustrated's Ralph Wiley and Boston sports radio station WEEI's Jimmy Myers indicates that not all black members of the sports news media have internalized the racialized ideology common to the American sports news media's treatment of basketball to the extent that "Magic" Johnson has. For an example of Wiley's work see Wiley, R. "And. . . It's Super Sub," Sports Illustrated, 11 May 1987, p. 50-54 which focuses on black Laker player Michael Cooper's conservative, family-oriented lifestyle off the court. For an example of Myers work see Baker, J. "Myers Stirs Controversy," Boston Herald, 4 May 1993, p. 88 which examines how Myers reported and analyzed the on court collapse of black Celtic star Reggie Lewis in the 1993 NBA Playoffs and the subsequent response of Celtics' management and team fans.

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- CBS Sports, Game Two of the 1984 NBA Finals, 1984.
- CBS Sports, Game Three of the 1984 NBA Finals, 1984.
- CBS Sports, Game Four of the 1984 NBA Finals, 1984.
- CBS Sports, Game Five of the 1984 NBA Finals, 1984.
- CBS Sports, Game Six of the 1984 NBA Finals, 1984.
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- NBA Entertainment/CBS Fox Video Sports, Larry Bird: A Basketball Legend, 1991.
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